# 17 The Reception of Leibniz's Philosophy in the Twentieth Century

*Robert Merrihew Adams*

Comprehensively Leibnizian philosophical views did not find many advocates in the twentieth century. But if we measure philosophers' reputations by the quantity and quality of work published about them by historians of philosophy, we must surely conclude that no pre-Kantian modern philosopher's reputation stood higher than Leibniz's in the twentieth century. In these remarks I reflect briefly on why that has been so and on some of the main trends in what has been an exceptionally rich secondary literature.

The turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century was marked in philosophical studies of Leibniz by the publication of three famous books, in English, French and German, by Bertrand Russell,[1] Louis Couturat[2] and Ernst Cassirer.[3] Couturat's book, on Leibniz's logic, and Russell's, which presented Leibniz as deriving his metaphysics from his logic (a reading with which Couturat agreed) may fairly be said to have set the dominant theme of Leibniz interpretation for the first two-thirds or so of the twentieth century. Russell and Couturat enjoyed two important advantages, which I think proved also to be advantages for Leibniz's reputation. They serve to introduce my remarks, first, about external factors affecting the reception of his work and, second, about factors more internal to the content of his philosophy.

The first of the advantages I mentioned is that Russell and Couturat had access to philosophical letters and papers of Leibniz that were not generally available to the public in the early modern period. The previous six decades had seen the beginnings of a stream of publications drawn from the Leibniz archive at Hannover, which would continue and increase into, throughout and beyond the twentieth century. Particularly important for Russell was the publication in 1846, by C. L. Grotefend, of Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* and correspondence with Antoine Arnauld.[4] The two massive series of Leibniz's mathematical and philosophical writings published by C. I. Gerhardt between 1849 and 1890 should also be mentioned.[5] Incomplete though they were, and very imperfect from a text-critical standpoint, they made available much previously unpublished material, were a major resource for Leibniz interpreters writing at the turn of the century and are still important today.

Couturat's work was also backed by his own large and excellent edition of *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz*,[6] which included several texts that provided fascinating support for his and Russell's view of the influence of Leibniz's logic on his metaphysics. A similar significance can be ascribed to the other most important collection of previously unpublished writings of Leibniz to appear during the first half of the twentieth century, Gaston Grua's two-volume edition of *Textes inédits*, published in 1948 but based on his research in the archive at Hannover before the Second World War.[7] Grua assembled the material as background for his study of relations between Leibniz's moral and legal philosophy and his theodicy; however, that study embraced a wide range of metaphysical and theological topics, and the parts of the *Textes inédits* that have probably had the greatest impact on the study of Leibniz are those concerned with metaphysical themes that are closely related to logic.

For the long run the weightiest, in every sense, of modern editions of Leibniz is the *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* being produced under the auspices of the Berlin Academy in eight multi-volume series.[8] Its major achievements, thus far, belong to the second half of the twentieth century; some of them will belong to the twenty-first. A few of its volumes were published between the two world wars, but they were not really what we would now call critical editions. Much of the critical work that should have been done on them has had to be redone in the postwar period, or still remains to be redone. The postwar volumes have been produced slowly, in the series of most interest to philosophers, but to an admirable critical standard. We now probably have Leibniz's philosophical writings to the end of the 1680s, apart from his correspondence, as complete as we will ever have them, and there is probably not much that will surprise us in his philosophical correspondence of that period, of which we already have a lot.[9]

I am a fan of the Berlin Academy edition and of the work that has been done on its philosophical series at the Leibnizforschungsstelle at Münster, but I should note a major lacuna. The project includes as yet no plan for a complete or systematic publication of Leibniz's theological papers, which form, I believe, the largest category in the catalogue of his surviving manuscripts—though some theological papers of recognised philosophical interest have found a place in the academy edition. It is hard not to see this omission as reflecting late modern rationalist discomfort with the pervasively theological character of much early modern rationalism. Perhaps it also reflects the fact that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theology has also been rather unfashionable in theology and religious studies during the twentieth century. Whatever the reasons for the omission, Leibniz's theological papers are a major resource for historical scholarship and should not remain inaccessible. He was a significant participant in contemporary theological discussions, across confessional lines, and was also an encyclopaedic, shrewd and very well informed commentator on them. Moreover, some of the topics of his theological interests are by no means irrelevant

to issues that are very much alive today, concerning, for instance, ways in which diverse religious traditions might relate to each other.

This omission notwithstanding, the achievement of the twentieth century in publishing previously unedited Leibniz texts is very large, and twentieth-century interpreters of Leibniz have increasingly been in a position to know quite a bit more of what he thought than their predecessors in previous centuries. Not that I am prepared to claim that we—nor even, perhaps, any of us—do yet effectively know all that we are now in a position to know, because the corpus (most of it still not translated from the original Latin or French) is so vast. I believe that this vastness of his corpus is in fact one of the causes of the flourishing, the intensity and the productivity of Leibniz scholarship in the twentieth century, and especially in the last few decades.

Leibniz repays study. In choosing a research project, philosophers, like other academics, tend to select topics about which they think they have a good chance of discovering something interesting and being able to say something novel or original. One way in which a great, dead philosopher can pass this test of being a good research subject is by writing so obscurely that it is easy to read his writings in ways in which no one has read them before. Leibniz did not prepare for fame in that way. His writing is virtually always lucid and to the point. There is so much of it, however, and it comes in such scattered fragments, that a talented student who has enough of an antiquarian bent to explore some of the less familiar corners of the corpus can be pretty confident of coming up with something new and interesting to say.

Leibniz repays study, further, in the frequency with which he offers an answer to philosophical questions we have reason to address to him. In this he has an advantage over Descartes, for instance. Descartes was a very careful writer, and also very discreet, as writers in the seventeenth century had reason to be. He was discreet not only in what he published and sent to correspondents, but also in not keeping and passing on to posterity much that did not fall in those public and semi-public categories. This can be frustrating for those who would interpret him today. There is a real danger, in working on Descartes, that one's project will develop a central question about which one cannot find even a plausible and interesting hint of an answer in the Cartesian corpus. Not so with Leibniz. He too was discreet in publishing and corresponding; for his own use, however, he wrote down very free explorations of ideas. He rarely if ever threw away what he had written, and his private explorations make up a major part of Hannover's treasure of manuscripts. As a result it is relatively rare that Leibniz's thought suggests an important question to which no answer is suggested, or at least interestingly hinted, in his writings.

I cannot resist the temptation to mention another way in which Leibniz repays study, though here I stray even farther from my starting point and roam perhaps across the border between intellectual and economic history.

In North America, anyway, the institutional position of early modern philosophy has changed dramatically in the last thirty years or so. Formerly studied, for the most part, by people who were philosophical professionals but historical amateurs, it is now a full-fledged academic specialty (as ancient philosophy has been for a much longer time), with recognised professional demands in its historical as well as its philosophical dimension. North American philosophy departments recognise it as such and want to hire fully qualified professionals to teach it. It has in fact become one of the most advantageous specialisations for philosophers entering the academic job market. That is, it is one of the fields in which the ratio of supply and demand is most favourable (or—let us face it—least unfavourable) to the applicants. Why is that? One of the most important factors, I believe, is the increasingly prevalent perception that fully qualified professionals in early modern philosophy should be able to read the texts in their original languages. That puts up the bar to entry, keeping the supply relatively small in relation to demand. But writing a dissertation on Hume proves nothing, and suggests nothing, about your competence in a foreign language. This is an economic way in which Leibniz, along with other continental philosophers of the early modern period, but not the British philosophers, repays study.

I have wandered pretty far from my starting point, which was the advantage Russell and Couturat enjoyed in access to texts. In the wandering, however, I have covered what I want to say about those factors in the twentieth-century reception of Leibniz's philosophy that are relatively external to its content. I promised to mention another advantage that Russell and Couturat had; with that one we begin to engage Leibniz's thought more directly.

The impact of Russell's and Couturat's logic-emphasising readings of Leibniz was certainly enhanced by the fact that they appeared during the years in which modern logic was being created, largely by Frege and Whitehead and Russell himself. By virtue of this timing, the impetus that their symbolic logic gave to interest in Leibniz was in all probability greater than any influence that Leibniz's ideas may have had on their logical theorising.[10] In this aspect of the Leibniz renaissance there was perhaps something of the familiar temptation to see, boringly enough, a bit of ourselves in the great, dead philosophers. But that was surely not all. Major currents in twentieth-century philosophy aspired to give formal logic a major role in philosophical theorising. One might hope to find in Leibniz a historic archetype whose example might yield instruction or inspiration for such a project.

The clearest case of such interaction between Leibniz's thought and twentieth-century formal philosophy is the appropriation of the language of possible worlds for the development of a formal semantics for the logic of possibility and necessity. That development, and related developments in metaphysics and other areas of philosophy, particularly in North America from the 1960s into the 1980s, sparked enormous excitement that marked in my opinion a coming of age of American philosophy. In that context

Leibniz's conception of possible worlds, and his views about necessity and contingency, aroused a significant echo of that excitement—though I believe (and have argued elsewhere) that his use of the idea of possible worlds was rather different from that which figures now in formal semantics for modalities.[11]

By the 1980s, however, the emphasis on the relation of Leibniz's metaphysics to his logic, still powerfully represented in the 1960s by G. H. R. Parkinson's fine book *Logic and Reality in Leibniz's Metaphysics*,[12] had come to seem to many of us one-sided, and interest had begun to move in other directions. One topic of increasing prominence, by that time, in the study of Leibniz, and of seventeenth-century philosophers more generally, was the imprint that their thought retains of the scholastic Aristotelianism that most of them sought to overturn. This is particularly important in relation to Leibniz, who, while self-consciously 'modern' in some important respects, also sought quite explicitly to breathe new life into some Aristotelian ideas, most specifically into that of substantial form.

It had long been recognised that the derivation of Leibniz's metaphysics from his theory of complete individual concepts that lay at the centre of Russell's and Couturat's interpretation could not go through as a purely logical derivation—that the derivation must depend on the assumption of something concretely real and powerful in the individual, corresponding to the complete concept. Where in Leibniz's philosophy should we look for such a metaphysical correlate to the complete concept? 'In his conception of substantial form' is the obvious answer for scholars attuned to the neo-Aristotelian themes in his thought.

A focus on the concept of substantial form connects with a rather different narrative of Leibniz's development from that suggested by Russell and Couturat. In their version of the story, Leibniz's mature philosophy dates from his realisation of the logical power of the complete concept theory in the mid-1680s. In the alternative, now increasingly prevalent version, the most important crystallising event from which one might date Leibniz's philosophical maturity is his decision to rehabilitate the concept of substantial form, which came somewhat earlier (just how early is still debated.)

By virtue of the metaphysical and far from purely logical character of the notion of substantial form, this shift in narrative focus goes along with a shift in topical focus, to one in which Leibniz's philosophising is seen as driven as much by interests in physics as by interests in logic. Whether for this reason or others, I think it is fair to say that whereas in the 1970s the most heated discussions about Leibniz's philosophy revolved around his logic and philosophy of logic, including especially his treatment of possibility and necessity, by the end of the twentieth century the most heated discussions concerned his philosophy of body.[13] I shall not presume to make any pronouncement here as to what will come of those discussions, except to predict with some confidence that Leibniz will retain his fascination and his stature as an archetypal source of theses worthy of philosophical discussion.

**NOTES**

1. Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz, with an Appendix of Leading Passages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900).
2. Louis Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz* (Paris: Alcan, 1901).
3. Ernst Cassirer, *Leibniz's System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1902).
4. *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz, Arnauld und dem Landgrafen Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels*, ed. C. L. Grotefend (Hannover: Verlag der Hahn'schen Hofbuchhandlung, 1846).
5. *Leibnizens mathematische Schriften*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: A. Asher; Halle: H. W. Schmidt, 1849–1863), and *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin, 1875–1890).
6. *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz*, ed. Louis Couturat (Paris, 1903).
7. Leibniz, *Textes inédits*, ed. Gaston Grua (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948).
8. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, edition of the Berlin Academy (Darmstadt and Berlin, 1923–).
9. Since these lines were written, Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Breife*, series II, vol. ii (Berlin, 2009) has appeared, completing the Berlin Academy edition of Leibniz's philosophical correspondence through 1694.
10. On the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reception of Leibniz's work in logic, see Massimo Mugnai's introduction to his translation of Leibniz, *Ricerche generali sull'analisi delle nozioni e delle verità, e altri scritti di logica* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2008) 40–54.
11. See Robert Merrihew Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 46–50.
12. G. H. R. Parkinson, *Logic and Reality in Leibniz's Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).
13. See, for instance, Daniel Garber, 'Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: The Middle Years', *The Natural Philosophy of Leibniz*, ed. Kathleen Okruhlik and James Robert Brown (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985) 27–130; Adams, *Leibniz* 217–399; and Daniel Garber, 'Leibniz and Idealism', in Hans Poser ed., *Nihil sine ratione,* VII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongreβ (Berlin, 10–14 September 2001), Nachtragsband, (Hannover: Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz-Gesellschaft, 2002), 19–28.