

Introduction

ON 13 NOVEMBER 1717, the secretary of the Académie Royale des Sciences, Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, presented to his colleagues in Paris a eulogy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who had died a year and a day earlier. Fontenelle had corresponded with the German philosopher on numerous occasions, and his “Éloge” could also draw on the biographical sketch provided by Leibniz’s secretary, Johann Georg Eckhart. Informed by such personal knowledge, the French savant naturally identified at the outset the aspect of his subject most worthy of a eulogy: the extraordinary range of Leibniz’s intellectual achievements. “In somewhat the same way that ancients could manage simultaneously up to eight harnessed horses,” he observed in the classicising vein still fashionable even in scientific circles in Paris, “Leibniz could manage simultaneously all the sciences.” Yet this very intellectual range confronted Fontenelle with seemingly insuperable difficulties in composing an intelligible biographical sketch. Leibniz, he lamented, “wrote about different matters during the same years, and . . . this almost perpetual jumble, which did not produce any confusion in his ideas, these abrupt and frequent transitions from one subject to another completely opposite subject, which did not trouble him, would trouble and confuse this history.”¹ Confronted by the difficulty of keeping eight rampant lines of intertwining intellectual development from getting hopelessly tangled with one another, Fontenelle abandoned “the customary chronological order” and organised his eulogy thematically.

During the almost three centuries since Leibniz’s death, the difficulty first confronted by Fontenelle has multiplied many times over. Leibniz himself confided to another contemporary that those who knew him only from his published works did not know him at all;² and the immense mountain of his private papers – placed under seal even before

his body had been removed from his house on the Schmiedestraße the evening after his death – eventually revealed that the published writings available to Fontenelle represented only a tiny fraction of Leibniz’s intellectual output. The size of the archive was enormous: thousands upon thousands of letters and hundreds upon hundreds of draft treatises, fragments, sketches, and notes, which once collected in the ongoing edition of the Berlin Academy of Sciences will eventually extend to some one hundred twenty large quarto volumes organized in eight distinct series (three devoted to Leibniz’s correspondence and five to his other writings).³ No less remarkable than their quantity was their intellectual quality. Far from broadcasting his views indiscriminately, Leibniz had kept many of his most profound convictions and most remarkable conclusions to himself and a few most trusted correspondents. Preserved essentially intact in the royal library in Hanover (recently renamed the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek), his papers have yielded a fresh supply of intellectual gems to virtually every generation between Leibniz’s and our own in an almost unmanageable stream of fresh works and partial editions of previously unpublished writings.⁴ Perhaps most impressive of all was their thematic scope. From philosophy and mathematics narrowly construed they extended across the encyclopaedia of the sciences and beyond: to astronomy, physics, chemistry, and geology; to botany, psychology, medicine, and natural history; to jurisprudence, ethics, and political philosophy; to history and antiquities, German, European and Chinese languages; to linguistics, etymology, philology, and poetry; to theology both natural and revealed; and beyond contemplative pursuits altogether to a wide range of practical affairs: from legal reform to the reunification of the churches, from diplomacy and practical politics to institutional reform, technological improvement, and the organisation of scientific societies, libraries, and the book trade.

Despairing of treating the many strands of Leibniz’s intellectual life in a single, chronologically organised narrative, Fontenelle decided “to split him up or, speaking philosophically, to analyze him.” Again a classical analogy suggested itself: “Antiquity made only one person from several Hercules; we will make several savants from a single Leibniz.” Already within a year of his death, Leibniz’s system was being broken up into several distinct fields and his contributions to them narrated one by one. When the textual difficulties of dealing with such an unwieldy mass of papers and publications was added to the technical challenge of grasping

such complex and wide-ranging thought, Leibniz inevitably became the domain of the specialist. The corpus of his writings was clinically dissected and portioned out to specialists for further study; and the coherent intellectual world which he had worked so long and hard to create was unceremoniously dismembered and divided amongst an entire army of scholars studying the complete encyclopaedia of the disciplines.

As if this intellectual disintegration were not damaging enough, not all of these disciplines have historically treated their share of his *Nachlaß* with equal regard. His enduring contributions to mathematics have never lacked admirers. His brilliant innovations in logic and remarkable conclusions in metaphysics have attracted even more attention. In many other sciences, however, his work inevitably proved less enduring. His rapidly consolidating reputation as a mathematician and a rationalist may have deflected attention from his contribution to other fields while deterring specialists who lacked facility with the supposed core of logic, metaphysics, and mathematics from investigating many crucial aspects of his life and work. However precisely it came about, the resulting imbalance is clearly reflected in the huge mass of secondary literature which has gradually accumulated around Leibniz's published and unpublished writings since his death. The standard bibliography of literature on Leibniz before 1980 lists 806 items on metaphysics and ontology, 552 on mathematics, 430 on logic, 282 on epistemology, and 220 on the physical sciences. Ethics and practical philosophy in the same bibliography, by contrast, share only 154 items. Political philosophy and law – the discipline in which Leibniz was formally trained – rate a mere 135. Theology and the philosophy of religion – arguably at the very centre of his lifelong project – score only 122. Linguistics and literary studies attracted a meagre 98 studies. Historiography – Leibniz's chief profession for the latter half of his career – and the philosophy of history a paltry 79. Medicine an anaemic 54.⁵ Whether or not these figures are an accurate index of Leibniz's enduring contributions to these fields – or indeed of the somewhat readjusted emphases of the most recent quarter century⁶ – they are clearly unrepresentative of the importance of these fields in his own mind and of his own efforts to contribute to them.

Moreover, the dismemberment of Leibniz's intellectual system and the unbalanced attention to its individual components has inevitably bred misunderstandings; and key features of Leibniz's writings have exacerbated this tendency. Leibniz, famously, was a man who sought to

reconcile apparent antitheses, often in extremely subtle and sophisticated ways. Leibniz, no less famously, corresponded with a great variety of contemporaries and displayed different facets of his thought to different people. Confronted by strikingly different emphases in diverse works and letters, some scholars hastily concluded that Leibniz was disingenuous, a timeserver, a courtier, willing to placate opposing parties by misrepresenting his principles, or a man without principles at all. Indeed, many of his more small-minded contemporaries formed similar conclusions even during his lifetime: some worried he would convert to Calvinism, others that he had already converted to Catholicism, others still that he was a closet atheist. Reductionist characterisations continued to proliferate after his death, ranging from deist and hard rationalist on the one hand to Kabbalist, alchemist, or Rosicrucian on the other. This tendency to question Leibniz's intellectual and personal integrity and to divide him – in the manner only metaphorically suggested by Fontenelle – into two quite separate philosophers reached its apex in the interpretation of perhaps the most eminent philosopher ever to dedicate a monograph specifically to Leibniz. No less a figure than Bertrand Russell concluded that Leibniz had not one philosophy but two: a bad, public philosophy or “fantastic fairy tale” designed to please and divert his courtly patrons, and a good, private philosophy centred around the nuggets of logic and mathematics which Russell himself so much admired.⁷

In recent decades, reductionistic interpretations such as these have generally been waning; and it is unlikely that any serious scholar now fully embraces Russell's dualistic account of Leibniz's philosophical *oeuvre*. Instead of resorting to *ad hominem* arguments such as these, Leibniz scholars have become increasingly adept at patiently teasing out the consistencies underlying apparently diverse formulations or interpreting genuine inconsistencies as part of a gradual process of philosophical exploration and development. A man like Leibniz, supremely capable of seeing the harmonies underlying seeming antitheses, was equally capable of presenting his single, coherent position in apparently incompatible ways; and a man pursuing practical as well as theoretical objectives often had good grounds for displaying the very different facets of his single, coherent position to correspondents from opposing theological, philosophical, or political camps.⁸ The key to interpreting even Leibniz's clearly philosophical texts consistently, in other words, is often to be found in his nonphilosophical commitments, in his broader intellectual projects, or

in the political and confessional contexts in which individual texts were written and intended to be read. There were unquestionably many different faces to Leibniz's philosophy, and an intensely private as well as an engagingly public side to his intellectual life; but the difference between the two is more like the two sides of a coin than a Janus face with sincere private and false public philosophies.

Through returning texts to their intellectual and historical contexts, in short, considerable progress has been made in recent decades in dispelling misconceptions, in redressing imbalances, and in working out the many ways in which the various aspects of Leibniz's thought fit and in fact evolved together. Against the backdrop of this work, the full unity of Leibniz's seemingly heterogeneous activities has begun to become apparent for the first time. Born two years before the end of the Thirty Years War, Leibniz was a man of synthesis and reconciliation. He was deeply convinced of the unity of knowledge and of the universality of truth to be discovered through ongoing intellectual exchange and conversation as well as excavated from millennia of human thought. At the same time, he was a 'blue-sky' thinker, ready to depart from common notions in order to develop striking new insights in an amazing variety of fields. The problem at hand, whether philosophical, mathematical, scientific, or practical, was for him always part of an all-encompassing, systematic plan of development of the whole encyclopaedia of the sciences, to be pursued as a collaborative enterprise publicly supported by an enlightened ruler. His final aim was the improvement of the human condition and thereby the celebration of the glory of God in His creation. Even the most theoretical reflections on logic, mathematics, metaphysics, physics, ethics, and theology were therefore, ultimately, *ad usum vitae* (in the service of life) and aimed at the happiness of humankind. In Leibniz's striking motto for the Society of Sciences of Berlin, his regulative ideal was to wed *Theoria cum Praxi*. Indeed, for all the heights of his logical, mathematical, and metaphysical thinking, Leibniz kept his feet sufficiently firmly on the ground to understand that political stability, health, and social security contributed more to the happiness of human beings than many elevated meditations. Leibniz was a man who, more than anything else, wanted to *do* certain things. If he perceived that some of his most striking philosophical views would have bred disagreement and misunderstanding rather than contributing to his main objectives, he preferred to keep them to himself.

Despite the potentially confusing kaleidoscope of his theoretical and practical activities, the breadth, length, and depth of Leibniz's intellectual life converged in a master project which unified most of his apparently miscellaneous endeavours and therefore provides a key to distilling from his innumerable and wide-ranging fragments a central objective consistently if episodically pursued. Throughout his life Leibniz nursed essentially the same dream: the dream of recalling the multiplicity of human knowledge to a logical, metaphysical, and pedagogical unity, centred on the theistic vision of the Christian tradition and aimed at the common good. This project was formulated in a series of texts which outlined his comprehensive plan to reform and improve the whole encyclopaedia of the sciences. In his youth this project was conceived as the plan of the *Demonstrationes Catholicae* ("Catholic Demonstrations"); later it was reformulated as a *Scientia Generalis* ("General Science"), to be expounded in a "demonstrative" encyclopaedia; and finally, in his very last years, it was restated as the *Éléments de la philosophie générale et de la théologie naturelle* ("Elements of General Philosophy and Natural Theology").⁹ If read in the light of Leibniz's all-embracing plan, many of the fragments and drafts of his Nachlaß take on a surprisingly coherent shape, and many of his more concrete efforts at political engagement or institutional reform can also be related to a cluster of core principles and objectives.

Despite increased awareness of the unity underlying Leibniz's wide-ranging thought, a general synthetic statement has been lacking. Studies of the highest quality have appeared in recent years dealing with important aspects of the big picture. Some have treated important themes of Leibniz's thought systematically, placing key philosophical convictions in their broader intellectual context. Others have traced the development of individual aspects of Leibniz's thought over a considerable portion of his lifetime. Others have dwelt extensively – even exhaustively – with the full range of Leibniz's activities during particular periods: his youth in Saxony, for instance; his years in Paris; or his trip to Italy. In other crucial thematic areas, invaluable works and collections of edited documents have appeared. Yet a truly synoptic work surveying in some detail Leibniz's life and thought in the light of recent research is wanting. The classic biography remains that of Gottschalk Eduard Guhrauer, published in Breslau in 1842.¹⁰ The most important life to appear in the last century was the briefer work of the mathematician E. J. Aiton, which supplemented Guhrauer chiefly on the scientific and mathematical aspects of Leibniz's

thought.¹¹ The recent lively narration of Leibniz's life by Eike Christian Hirsch, written in a popular style for the general public, should also be mentioned.¹² Given the difficulties which have confounded biographers since Fontenelle, it is perhaps not difficult to understand why the field is not awash with scholarly biographies of Leibniz; but as perspectives have broadened and deepened, the need for a fresh synopsis has grown irresistible.

Equally apparent is the need to attempt this intellectual reunification in narrative fashion. Common sense alone suggests the need for a narrative approach. If the exceptionally various domains of Leibniz's thought were interconnected in a coherent synthesis, it stands to reason that this immense system did not come into being in an instant but must have evolved from a few basic intuitions, assumptions, or aspirations over a considerable period of time. The experience of reading Leibniz's mature texts also confirms this need. Even mature presentations of Leibniz's metaphysics such as the *Monadology* often appear bewildering, not simply because they lack the full apparatus of supporting argumentation, but also because that argumentation is intertwined with a pattern of intellectual development ranging over several decades and many disciplines. His conclusions often become far more intelligible – and his results appear far more powerful – when viewed as the outcome of a long process of intellectual evolution. Historical investigation has also demonstrated the indispensable need for a genetic approach. Since Willy Kabitz at least, specialists have been aware that many of Leibniz's most fundamental philosophical commitments were established remarkably early.¹³ But if a narrative account is indispensable, this narrative cannot be restricted to philosophy. The problems which Leibniz attempted to solve ranged far beyond the realm of philosophy – even the broadly defined philosophy of the seventeenth century – to embrace the entire encyclopaedia of the arts and sciences. Indeed, they spread beyond theoretical considerations to embrace practical concerns as well, including politics, ethics, law, medicine, practical, social and institutional reform, and technological innovation. Just as a comprehensive presentation of Leibniz's thought requires a narrative dimension, that narrative must expand from philosophy to embrace his whole world.

Here we encounter one further difficulty; for Leibniz inhabited a complex and unfamiliar entity – the now vanished world of the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation – and that entity exercised a profound

influence over every stage of his life and every aspect of his work. The problems of ecclesiastical, political, and cultural fragmentation, particularly acute in central Europe, had exercised several generations of central European intellectuals before Leibniz, and these figures provided some of the earliest and most enduring influences on his all-embracing synthetic project. It was these early aspirations which filtered the influences he later received and which provided the intellectual context which unified his seemingly miscellaneous endeavours. It was likewise these fundamental aspirations and unifying projects which so sharply distinguished Leibniz from his most celebrated western European contemporaries and which explain the broad shape of his reception: the incredulity of contemporary Englishmen to his ideas, the ridicule of a later generation of Frenchmen, and his great influence within eighteenth-century central Europe and Scandinavia. Last but by no means least, the concrete circumstances of Leibniz's Germany also provide the key to understanding his extensive nonphilosophical interests and activities in politics, diplomacy, institutional reform, and ecclesiastical reunification, as well as the means for understanding the coherence of these activities with his more narrowly philosophical concerns. Returning Leibniz to his central European context thus provides the opportunity to portray him, not as a 'modern' Western intellectual unaccountably marooned in the politically and intellectually 'backward' petty states of central Europe, but as a distinctively central European variant of early modern thought which in fact draws upon a long and fruitful if largely neglected tradition. Many of the keys to the unity of Leibniz's life and thought are therefore to be found in the relatively uncelebrated places where few have thought to look for them: not merely or even primarily in Paris, London, and The Hague, but in Leipzig, Altdorf, and Nuremberg; in Herborn, Helmstedt, and Wolfenbüttel; and more obviously in Mainz, Hanover, Vienna, and Berlin – a further challenge, if any were needed, to decipher Leibniz's *Nachlaß*.

Stated in properly Leibnizian terms, the riddle first confronted by Fontenelle is how to reduce the multiplicity of Leibniz's activities to a biographical unity. Applying the approach to this problem outlined above is intended to produce an intellectual biography unified by four basic, underlying theses. The first of these theses is that Leibniz's life and work need to be assessed as a whole. In contrast to the tendency to characterise his philosophy exclusively in terms of his logic or metaphysics, or his thought exclusively in terms of his philosophy, or his life exclusively in terms of his thought, this thesis argues that a full appreciation of Leibniz

must embrace his life and work, his theoretical reflections and his practical activities. Hence the need for a comprehensive account.

A second, related thesis is that this whole is a remarkably unified one. This thesis confronts the tendency to see Leibniz's practical affairs as a tragic distraction from his philosophical investigations, or to judge some of his intellectual projects retrospectively as more precious than others. Instead, this thesis assumes for heuristic purposes that Leibniz's life was rather like his thought: that his intellectual and practical affairs were unified by a small number of basic principles or objectives, and that everything was connected with everything else. Stated more prosaically, this thesis assumes that the last universal genius was no fool, that Leibniz was not a bad judge of which options, amongst those actually available to him, were most likely to advance his central projects, and that all of his major undertakings have something important to tell us about his major objectives. Hence the need for an account which is reasonably systematic as well as comprehensive.

The third thesis is that the most basic of these unifying principles and aspirations were established remarkably early and that the outlines of Leibniz's life and thought emerged organically from them. Although by no means discounting the importance of his mature philosophy, this approach emphasizes that the seeds of that philosophy were planted in his youth. In a manner reminiscent of his monads, it almost seems as if the most basic features of Leibniz's intellectual system were implicit from the beginning. At the same time, since his theoretical projects were ultimately dedicated to practical objectives, he did not resist – indeed he positively pursued – involvement in the world of practical affairs. And while new developments refashioned and changing circumstances reshaped the means in which he sought to obtain his objectives, Leibniz preserved and pursued his original vision with remarkable tenacity. Hence the need for a narrative account.

Finally, these distinctive commitments were established so early and preserved so tenaciously because they were not created *ex nihilo* but were deeply rooted in the environment of his native country. Against those tempted to portray Leibniz as a progressive westerner stranded in an intellectual backwater, this thesis argues that Leibniz was in essence a German philosopher – or, far more precisely and adequately, a philosopher of the Holy Roman Empire. Although the territorial and confessional fragmentation of his homeland ultimately deprived him of the resources needed to realise many of his audacious aspirations, it was precisely those

fragmented conditions which had generated and sustained those aspirations in the first place; and it was these aspirations which sharply distinguished Leibniz from most of his western European intellectual contemporaries. Hence the need for an exposition set as firmly as possible in its concrete historical context.

None of these four theses is entirely novel, of course. The second and third in particular have been implicit or explicit in a good deal of the best recent Leibniz literature. But the only way to bring them all together and to develop them extensively is in a single large book which is reasonably comprehensive, systematic, narrative, and historically contextualised. The general purpose of this book, then, is to stitch back together the man dismembered by Fontenelle and his successors by emphasizing the organic development of a generally harmonious system of thought and action within a particular historical context. In doing so it also seeks to capture some of the key intellectual features of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe which were both emblematically represented and dramatically transcended by Leibniz himself. By mediating complex ideas through the vehicle of a biographical narrative, it aims to illustrate how thought can only be understood fully in the context of a life, as a life can only be understood fully in the context of its time and space.

This general strategy still leaves the more prosaic problem of how to deal with Leibniz's lifelong ability to pursue several distinct lines of intellectual investigation simultaneously. A purely chronological method of organisation is obviously unworkable. A detailed chronology of Leibniz's life and work in fact already exists in the invaluable *Leben und Werk von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, published in 1969 by Kurt Müller and Gisela Krönert; but this is a "Nachschlagewerk" ("reference work"), conceived not as a biography but as a "point of departure for a scholarly biography" of Leibniz, "which has long been wanting".¹⁴ If there were any doubt about the seriousness of the problem originally confronted by Fontenelle, this *Chronik* displays it *in extenso*: on every page we see "the almost perpetual jumble" of "different matters," the "abrupt and frequent transitions from one subject to another completely opposite subject," which render any strictly chronological narrative of Leibniz's life and thought almost unintelligible and entirely unreadable.

In order to recast Leibniz's life in a form intelligible to those of us who are not universal geniuses, chronological science must, therefore, yield to narrative art. While the series of chapters which follows is arranged