CHAPTER I

Thinking Freedom

Leibniz is the genuine initiator of German Idealism. This claim has an illustrious heritage.[1] Wilhelm Windelband[2] (1848–1915) and nineteenth-century historians of philosophy[3] had long recognised the decisive importance of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), 'the immortal Leibniz' as Fichte designates him,[4] for the development of German idealist thought. In his seminal work of 1917, *Freiheit und Form*,[5] Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) offered the most energetic and sustained defence of this position. Writing at the height of the Great War, in sharp opposition to the prevailing climate of German chauvinism, exceptionalism, and cultural closure,[6] Cassirer affirmed the idealists' deep engagement with the broader European Enlightenment, but it was particularly Leibniz, he contended, who forged the critical instruments with which the idealists were able to diagnose the modern world. Cassirer argued that in acknowledging the rights of free, rational beings as inalienable and repudiating irrational dependencies and subordinations, Leibniz provided the fundamental ethical impulse articulated and systematised in Kant and Kant-inspired

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[1] Ernst Cassirer, *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962 [1902]), 457–58. This book was Cassirer's *Habilitationsschrift*.

[2] Wilhelm Windelband, *Die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie in ihrem Zuzammenhange mit der allgemeinen Kultur und den besonderen Wissenschaften. Erster Band* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1911), 464–67.

[3] E. Zeller, *Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie seit Leibniz* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1873/1875); B. Erdmann, *Martin Knutzen und seine Zeit* (Leipzig: Voss, 1876; Hildesheim: Olms, 1975); J. H. Erdmann, *Leibniz und die Entwickluing des Idealismus vor Kant* (Stuttgart: Fromann, 1932 [1842]); K. Fischer, *Leibniz und seine Schule* (Mannheim/Heidelberg: Bassermann, 1855/1867/1889/1902/1920).

[4] J. G. Fichte, 'Rezension des Anaesidemus', *Gesamtausgabe*, Bd. I/2 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1965), 61.

[5] Ernst Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form. Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001 [1917]).

[6] David R. Lipton, *Ernst Cassirer: The Dilemma of a Liberal Intellectual in Germany 1914–1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 50–69.

idealisms.[7] Leibniz formed generations of philosophers throughout the German lands, but for Cassirer the fruitfulness of his ethical and political conceptions becomes fully apparent only through the work of Kant and not in Leibniz's immediate successors like Christian Wolff. Kant conducted a successful theoretical revolution against the Wolffian system and its advocacy of Enlightened absolutism, but the result is a new vindication, a 'true apology'[8] for Leibniz, reviving and rethinking his basic concepts, and mobilising them in defence of rational freedom. The Leibnizian foundation and the Kantian refoundation and its consequences are the subjects of this enquiry.

Cassirer's detailed arguments, as current research has shown, demand revision in significant respects,[9] but his work provides a connective thread for the present study. Despite the centrality of political thought to his argument, Cassirer proceeded indirectly in *Freiheit und Form*, primarily through metaphysics and aesthetics. Here, instead, we shift the focus explicitly to German idealist political thought and its conceptual roots in the Leibnizian system. The innovation proposed here consists in the concept of post-Kantian perfectionism, its origins in Kant's critiques of his precursors, and its multiple elaborations among his successors. The contention is that a specific idea of freedom, as self-initiated and self-directed activity, underlies this new ethical-political perfectionist current, and that this idea, modified and recast, is the Leibnizian heritage which the idealists retrieve.

The Kantian Revolution

The revolution in ethical and social thought that Kant achieves introduces new concepts of freedom and personhood[10] and reconfigures political debate, but this revolution has deep historical roots. In the German territories, political theories of Kantian derivation emerge in the eighteenth

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[7] Cassirer, *Leibniz' System*, 457–58, contends that Leibniz's ethical thought provides the kernel of the Kantian categorical imperative.

[8] Immanuel Kant, '*Über eine Entdeckung*, nach der alle neue Kritik der reinen Vernunft durch eine ältere entbehrlich gemacht werden soll', Ak. 8, 250; Henry E. Allison, *Essays on Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189–200. Nicholas Jolley, 'Kant's "True Apology for Leibniz"', in *Leibniz's Legacy and Impact*, ed. Julia Weckend and Lloyd Strickland (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 112–25.

[9] For a detailed study of critical receptions of Cassirer's interpretation, see Christoph Widdau, *Cassirers Leibniz und die Begründung der Menschenrechte* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016).

[10] Walter Jaeschke, 'Ästhetische Revolution: Stichworte zur Einführung', in *Früher Idealismus und Frühromantik. Der Streit um die Grundlagen der Ästhetik (1795–1805)*, ed. Walter Jaeschke and Helmut Holzhey (Meiner: Hamburg, 1990), 2.

century through a long process of engagement with the heritage of Leibniz, as represented especially by Christian Wolff and his school. These debates are framed by the opposition between the contending political aims of perfection and freedom. The decisive question is whether the state ought authoritatively to prescribe, and to impose, a substantive vision of the good life for its subjects. Wolff's theory of political perfection, broadly inspired by Leibniz, is reminiscent of Aristotle's doctrine of *eudaimonia*,[11] or happiness as fulfilment of natural capabilities, and continues a long tradition of perfectionist thought whose object is the thriving of a fixed human nature. The state must actively promote the felicity of its members, including their material needs and their higher intellectual and spiritual aspirations. The Kantian criticism of Wolff rejects the paternalistic state and its theoretical basis in the ethics of perfection in favour of spontaneous, self-determining activity, and derives the idea of a juridical order which upholds the principle of free, rightful interaction. Kant's strictures constitute a decisive repudiation of the Wolffian tradition. The effect of this shift in orientation is to disempower political perfectionism of the older kind.

The nature of Kant's criticisms and the resulting shifts in political and ethical debate can be lightly sketched here, for subsequent elaboration. Perfectionism is the doctrine that the development of certain capabilities is of intrinsic and not merely instrumental value.[12] The end or value promoted is a good in itself and not merely as conducive to other purposes. It is, moreover, of supervening value, not merely one good among others, but the highest attainable good, providing the appropriate and predominant end for ethical orientation. Theories of this kind also tend to be *consequentialist*: the moral worth of an action is measured by its contribution to furthering this end. How the end is specified varies amongst thinkers, from Aristotelian *eudaimonia* to Stoic virtue to Wolffian *felicitas*, and these will be indicated in their place, but characteristically it consists in some idea of the proper life in reference to a given conception of human nature.[13]

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. D. Ross, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Book I; Anthony Kenny, 'Aristotle on Happiness', in *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 2, *Ethics and Politics*, ed. J. Barnes, M. Schofield, and R. Sorabji (London: Duckworth, 1977), 25–32.

[12] David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 185. See also Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[13] Luca Fonnesu, *Dovere* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1999), 21–24. These general orienting principles are typically described by theorists as the 'meta-ethical' level, setting the standards by which specific rules for designating permissible and impermissible acts can be derived or judged; the latter, of greater concreteness, are usually referred to as the normative level of application.

For Kant, the failing of the old perfectionism as an ethical programme is that it sets up external standards of the good life and requires the moral will to comply with them.[14] This position is inadmissible for Kant because even though it favours intelligible over merely sensible goods, it considers these goods as prior to, and foundational for, duty. The moral will would thus be determined, teleologically, by an appeal to a value outside itself, and this is inconsistent with Kant's sense of autonomy. Moreover, these older theories misconstrue the ends of moral action. They place happiness rather than autonomy at the heart of moral theory. This marks them as versions of what Kant calls heteronomy, or the determination of the will be something outside of itself. A true ethic is autonomous, where the will legislates to itself and enacts that legislation in concrete deeds. For Kant, most ethical systems before his own were guilty of some form of heteronomy; he distinguishes empirical versions, or the blandishments of pleasure or desire in contravention of moral duty, from rational heteronomy or perfection, which seeks an intelligible rather than a sensuous good, but which is equally consequentialist in measuring the goodness of an act by its effects, not its animating principle. Kant insists on validating actions through the maxim that the act is to carry out, and not through the contingent results of the action. The good will is the criterion of the good deed. Such an approach is termed 'deontological', from the Greek participle *deon*, meaning what is required. One implication of Kant's position, of great importance for ensuing debates on the state, is that considerations of intrinsic rightness place limits on what actions count as acceptable, even if they might yield beneficial results.

A further defect of perfectionisms before Kant is that they typically invoke state authority to enforce the good life, as its proponents define it.[15] This paternalistic imposition violates another Kantian principle – the imperative to treat other rational beings as ends in themselves and as agents capable of maturely fixing their own ends. Prescribing to individuals politically how to seek their own well-being infringes their fundamental

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[14] I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 33–42; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 110–11. Cf. John Rawls, 'Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy', in *Kant's Transcendental Deductions*, ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 97. In contrast to Aristotelian and Leibnizian perfectionisms, Bentham's utilitarianism is a system of *empirical* heteronomous principles, designating objects of sensibility and desire as determining grounds for the will (or at least offering no qualitative grounds for distinction among pleasures). Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. J. H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 11, 100.

[15] This is a criticism at the normative level.

right of self-determination. On this basis Kant repudiates the Wolffian tutelary state, and among his followers this principle yielded a new orientation in political thinking. In his final systematic work of political theory, the *Metaphysics of Morals* of 1797, Kant demarcates the field of activity or practical reason into three spheres – happiness, right, and morality. Happiness involves the exercise of what Kant calls empirical practical reason, while right and morality are distinct usages of pure practical reason, the differentiation of which will be explored in greater detail subsequently.[16] He extracts from the old idea of *eudaimonia* one of its components, material satisfaction or need fulfilment, and leaves the pursuit of this end open to personal initiatives. Such activities are restricted by institutions of right that assure the coexistence of these many quests but, unlike absolutist or tutelary interventions, do not seek to determine the contents of what counts as happiness for individual agents. To this extent happiness is depoliticised but is subject to the constraints of enforceable rightful interaction, so that the possibility of free activity remains available to all. Kant likewise extracts from *eudaimonia* another set of ideas, of virtue and moral development, which he situates in the separate, depoliticised sphere of the moral life. Here no coercion is permitted, and here Kant envisages the practice of autonomy as rational self-legislation. This architectonic of practical reason structures later systems of ethical-political thought that constitute our present subject.

Kant, Leibniz, and the New Perfectionism

But Kant's critique, as devastating and immediately effective as it is,[17] does not rule out all possible perfectionisms. Freedom and perfection are not simply opposing ends but can be combined in new ways, responsive to Kant's objections to the prevailing forms. In the process of distancing from the older perfectionism, a renewal and transformation of perfectionist ethics occurs, and it occurs among Kantians themselves. Kant's followers – originating with Humboldt, Schiller, and Fichte – formulated a new perfectionist approach, responsive to his strictures on the unacceptability of the older doctrines of perfection, and able to withstand Kantian criticisms. Arising immediately in the wake of Kant's 1785 *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* and extending to the work of Karl Marx and beyond, these new systems focus not on the substantive goods towards which human nature putatively tends or on predefined ideas of happiness, but

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[16] See Chapter 4.   [17] See Chapter 5.

rather on the exercise of freedom itself and the conditions that sustain it. The starting point of these new systems is the concept of rational self-legislation which Kant's account of practical reason had espoused, together with interrogations of its possible field of application. The enhancement of the capacity for free, rational self-determination, and not any given substantial end, defines the objective of this perfectionism after Kant. The end to be pursued is no longer an authoritatively promoted conception of human nature and its thriving. Instead, in abstracting from specific purposes and considering only the structure and compossibility of actions, the new approaches after Kant are formal rather than material. As the capacity for free self-defining and self-initiating activity, a capacity that we will designate 'spontaneity',[18] the proposed end is internal to and constitutive of rational action itself and thus circumvents Kant's heteronomy critique. Accompanying this change are close explorations of the objective, institutional, and intersubjective conditions for the practice of freedom, and demands for the reform, extension, and consolidation of these conditions. Kant's own usage of autonomy as *moral* self-legislation is broadened to include rational agency in the political and social sphere and the critical revision of prevailing relations and institutions in the name of freedom.[19]

Yet this radical shift of orientation is no mere repudiation of Leibniz. In rejecting Wolff's application of Leibniz's political thought, Kant retrieved elements of the Leibnizian system that had remained dormant in Wolff and other Enlightenment figures, redefined these elements, and set them in a new framework, which his own successors in turn elaborated and extended in their new perfectionist systems. Leibniz provided fundamental ethical concepts and conceptual schemes through which the philosophical revolution occurs, elaborating new comprehensions of reason's legislative authority in morality and politics. The essence of this revolution, as effected by Leibniz's philosophical heirs, is an engagement with modern society: an extended reflection on individuality, autonomy, and freedom.

This intimate connection between Leibniz, Kant, and subsequent idealisms is the point which Ernst Cassirer persuasively argues, especially in metaphysics and aesthetics. Political theory and ethics remain fertile fields for new historical and systematic investigation into prevailing Leibnizian

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[18] As explained throughout, 'spontaneity' is a technical term meaning not unreflective action but action that arises from inner determinations or causes.
[19] See, for example, Christopher Yeomans, *The Expansion of Autonomy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

influences.[20] Paul Redding[21] has recently demonstrated Leibnizian derivations of German idealist logic and metaphysics and has established important continuities among many of the authors whom the present study addresses. Here, the emphasis on practical reason and politics will revise and amplify earlier accounts and afford further insights into Kant's relation to Leibniz and its ethical-political consequences.

Latterly, the convergence of Leibnizian and Kantian approaches has been examined from two independent perspectives, but without explicit reference to Cassirer's insightful studies. On the one hand, Christopher Johns has underlined the previously under-acknowledged deontological aspects in Leibniz's thought and has directed attention to his early studies in natural law theory as establishing the rights of free activity, and the corresponding duties of subjects to refrain from hindering one another's exercise of their rational expressive and formative capacities. Leibniz is generally taken to espouse a version of consequentialist or teleological ethics, measuring the good of an action by its results, not its underlying maxim or rule. Leibniz and Kant are typically considered to be antipodes, but Johns offers a more nuanced reading. He establishes that deontological considerations of inalienable right, especially rights to self-defined spontaneous action, remain operative as limiting conditions within Leibniz's overall teleological and consequentialist ethic,[22] and thus align him more closely with Kant. Johns implicitly endorses Cassirer's interpretation of inalienable rights and applies it directly to political discourse. This step is fundamental to the present narrative.

The second line of convergence is represented by authors such as Paul Guyer and Luca Fonnesu, who stress the decisive importance of perfectionist elements in Kant's own thought, narrowing the gap which standard readings establish between teleological and deontological theories.[23] Guyer pursues two strategies in this regard. First, he identifies a specific strain of what he calls Emersonian perfectionism, recently exemplified in the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, in which reason is instrumental to

[20] See note 9.
[21] Paul Redding, *Continental Idealism. Leibniz to Nietzsche* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); *Conceptual Harmonies. Origins and Development of Hegel's Logic* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 109–44.
[22] Christopher Johns, *The Science of Right in Leibniz's Moral and Political Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).
[23] Paul Guyer, 'Civic Responsibility and the Kantian Social Contract', in *Recht-Geschichte-Religion. Die Bedeuting Kants für die Gegenwart*, ed. Herta Nagl-Docekal and Rudolf Langthaler (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), 27–47 and, in the same volume, Luca Fonnesu, 'Kants praktische Philosophie und die Verwirklichung der Moral', 49–61.

freedom, the supervening value; and he shows the affinities of Kant, particularly in the Doctrine of Virtue of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, with this approach.[24] Second, in his more recent work he defends the idea of a Kantian perfectionism differing from that of Christian Wolff. On this reading, the object of Kant's perfectionism is not the promotion of any substantive idea of happiness or *eudaimonia*, as in Wolff, but the perfection of the quality of the moral will, or of choice, as Guyer puts it.[25]

The position which Guyer attributes to Kant himself is significantly different from one defined in the present account as post-Kantian perfectionism,[26] a distinct development of Kant's own views, anticipated but not fully articulated in his work. The ethical perfectionism that Guyer identifies in Kant (and whose interpretative status is not in question here) seeks to strengthen the will and virtuous attitudes, that is, it deals with the acquisition of the capacity for moral autonomy; and its domain is the Kantian sphere of virtue, not of right. It maintains the Kantian restriction of autonomy to *moral* action. Post-Kantian perfectionism, on the other hand, aims at the enhancement of freedom or rational agency in general. Primarily a *juridical* perfectionism, it occupies the sphere of right, not of morality. It seeks to consolidate the practices and institutions of right and to expand the scope of rightful action in the sense-world. It also aims to secure the objective conditions for effective action in pursuit of self-given ends, such that each individual may pursue particular conceptions of happiness without authoritative imposition. The quest for happiness is subject to the constraints of rightful interaction, but not of direct political imposition.

The fundamental shift, then, is from happiness to freedom as the supervening end. The quest for happiness is not discounted but is set in a new context where right prevails and delimits. Further changes occur in the idea of happiness itself, and in the problem of coordination of actions. The new post-Kantian theories not only displace happiness from its central role in teleological ethics, but also reconceptualise it as a facet of spontaneity: it is neither a singular or substantive end to be obligatorily enacted by the state, nor are its forms and contents fixed by ahistorical species

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[24] Guyer, 'Civic Responsibility and the Kantian Social Contract', 27–47.
[25] Paul Guyer, 'Kantian Perfectionism', in *Perfecting Virtue: New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*, ed. Lawrence Jost and Julian Wuerth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 194–213.
[26] Douglas Moggach, 'Post-Kantian Perfectionism', in *Politics, Religion, and Art. Hegelian Debates*, ed. D. Moggach (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 179–200.

attributes. Involving the individual use of empirical practical reason rather than deriving directly from political edict or natural necessity, happiness becomes multiple and diverse, with important consequences for ethics. Processes of self-formation and *Bildung* acquire their saliency in this context, since persons must shape their own purposes and actions in mutual adjustment with others, as right requires. Corresponding to the shift from happiness as a singular predefined species attribute to its multiple subjective forms, there occurs a parallel transition from ideas of social homogeneity or identity of ends to problems of coexistence among multiple, diverse, and possibly contending interests. The political problem becomes that of synthesising the multiple in freedom, securing not uniformity but compossibility of actions. The coordination problem among such quests for happiness thus demands a solution. The Leibnizian hypothesis of a pre-established harmony of interests is inadmissible; instead, social accord is a (problematic) result to be won through the exertions of practical reason, but without metaphysical guarantees. Nor must a tutelary state, as in Wolff's account, be authorised to dictate the features of the good life and to steer its members towards this goal. What defines the perfectionist character of this post-Kantian approach as fundamentally new is the effort to stabilise the accord among subjectivities in ways maximally compatible with the freedom of each, and further the commitment to 'social creation',[27] or processes of social change which enhance the institutional and interpersonal context for free activity and progressively eliminate obstacles to its exercise, reconceiving the logic and limits of state intervention, and developing distinctive accounts of rightful interaction and citizenship.

In all these endeavours the concept of freedom as spontaneity is paramount. This usage must be carefully distinguished from the word in common parlance, where it tends to mean unreflective or hasty, unplanned action. Here the meaning is technical: an action is spontaneous if it originates from an inner motive, and not merely as a response to external stimuli. In contrast to ordinary usage, spontaneity in this sense implies that such actions contain reflection, or rational evaluation and judgement, as a constitutive element. Three distinct but related concepts of spontaneity will feature prominently in this account. In Leibniz, spontaneity means processes of internally generated, self-caused change, such that activity is never engendered from an external source, but always from the subject's

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[27] Marc Maesschalck, *Droit et création sociale chez Fichte* (Louvain: Peeters, 1996).

own inner resources; Leibniz's account is directed primarily against emergent theories of mechanistic materialism such as Hobbes, where all movement is induced from without, through the attraction and repulsion which external objects exert upon subjects.[28] This usage in Leibniz implies an internal 'conatus' or striving, or an individual law of development, governing the attainment of perfection in the two dimensions he identified: the unity of unity and multiplicity (the harmonious display of a many-sided development);[29] and (as in Aristotle) a teleological process of fulfilment, by which an implicit content is made explicit, or a potential property or set of properties is realised.[30]

In the second meaning of the concept, in Kant, spontaneity in its practical dimension refers to the capacity of subjects to abstract from the workings of external causes, and to admit them selectively into their action plans in accordance with a self-given rule. This capacity is what Kant defines as negative freedom, and it is reason as constituting the very basis of our freedom, rather than serving as a means to exercise it. It is intrinsically connected to our capacity for positive freedom, or autonomy, moral self-legislation in accord with universal principles.[31] In a critical appropriation and development of the Leibnizian notion of spontaneity, the emphasis has shifted from the metaphysics of (monadic) causality and intrinsic laws of motion, to the practical use of reason as a gauge and standard for the kinds of external causes that we may allow to influence our actions. Spontaneity operates across the three spheres of Kantian practical reason: in individual definitions of happiness, in the interplay of right where boundaries for individual activities are set and upheld, and in the uncoerced cultivation of virtue and the moral life.

The third meaning of spontaneity is a further development of the Kantian account, and fully compatible with it, though it is not explicitly laid out in Kant's own work. Here, as in Fichte, spontaneity refers to the capacity of subjects to exert causality outside of themselves in the

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[28] R. Bodéus, ed., *Leibniz-Thomasius. Correspondance 1663–1672* (Paris: Vrin, 1993), 55 ff.

[29] Leibniz to Wolff, May 18, 1715, in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmann, 1887), Bd. III, 233–34, cited and translated in Frederick Beiser, *Diotima's Children, German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 35, n. 16: 'Perfection is the harmony of things, that is, the state of agreement or identity in variety'.

[30] Leibniz, 'Two Notions for Discussion with Spinoza', in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. L. Loemker (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), 167: 'By perfection I mean every simple quality which is positive and absolute, or which expresses whatever it expresses without any limits.' Cited in Beiser, *Diotima's Children*, 35 n. 15.

[31] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 33–35.