Reflections on Kant's Criticism of the Leibnizian Philosophy

Floy E. Andrews

Kant's lengthier criticisms of the Leibnizian philosophy are found in three principal works: in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781); in *On a Discovery According to which any New Critique of Pure Reason has been rendered Superfluous by an Earlier One* (1790); and in *On What Real Progress has Metaphysics made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff (circa* 1793). The first and third are straight-forward criticisms which endeavour to locate the source of Leibniz's 'mistake'; the second is ostensibly a defense of Leibniz against the misinterpretations of the Wolffians.

Kant's extended criticisms of the Leibnizian philosophy in *The Critique of Pure Reason*[1] and in *On What Real Progress has Metaphysics made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff*[2] characterize that philosophy in essentially the same four elements: (1) the identity of indiscernibles, (2) the principle of sufficient reason, (3) the system of pre-established harmony and monadology, (4) space and time, and sensibility as 'confused thought'. But it is in the *Critique* that the reason is given for why these four elements (and not others). The 'Table of the Concepts of Reflection' in the *Critique* provides the unexpected advantage, Kant says, of putting forth the distinctive features of Leibniz's system, as well as the chief ground for this strange way of thinking. It is in reflection, transcendental reflection, in which it can be discovered whether a specific representation belongs to the pure understanding or whether to sensible intuition. But Leibniz compared all things with one other by concepts alone, and therefore found no other differences except those through which the understanding distinguishes its pure concepts from one another. Thus, he 'intellectualized appearances', regarding sensibility as 'confused thinking'.

Kant says of (1) the identity of indiscernibles that this is a direct consequence of holding that there are no *sensibilia*. Now, if the Transcendental Aesthetic is true, then the principle of the identity of indiscernibles as referring to 'drops of water' (Kant's example), is false. But in Leibniz there is unmistakeably the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal* (therefore, *sensibilia*), and the phenomenal is the appearance of the noumenal. The 'identity of indiscernibles' is

1. A260/B316 - A289/B346.
2. *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff, ed. Friedrich Theodor Rink, trans. Ted Humphrey, New York, 1983, 97-103.*

Dionysius, Vol. XIV, Dec. 1990, pp. 157-167

the dialectical principle that the phenomenon is the noumenon's own difference. In this first example, it appears that Kant does not recognize, for whatever reasons, this dialectical structure in Leibniz's thought, for everywhere, as we shall see, there are in Leibniz's mature philosophy (dating from about 1695) these structures of an inwardness as the ground of itself and its externality, so that externality itself *is* this inwardness.

Kant says that Leibniz in (2) the 'principle of sufficient reason' admits as opposition to *being* only *nothing*, not another reality. Hence evil is only apparent opposition and the motionlessness of a body that had been moved only the body's lack of moving force.

> He did not consider that in intuition, . . . that is, in space, the opposition of one reality (a moving force) to another, that is, a moving force in an opposed direction — thus also by analogy, real motives in a subject — can be united and the result of this conflict of realities, . . . which can be known *a priori*, can be a negation.[3]

Thus, Kant charges Leibniz with a failure to recognize opposed physical objects in space and time, as well as opposed motives in moral judgments.

Yet for Leibniz, in phenomena there are both activity and passivity as seemingly two opposed principles. But only those phenomena are 'well-founded' where the difference between activity and passivity originates in *force*, for *force* is just the principle of activity and passivity: "We show, therefore, that there is in every substance a force of action and that if it is a created substance, there is also a force of suffering."[4] *Force*, like the noumenal, is the principle of its own difference.

With respect to evil, Leibniz says the following: "Possible things are those which do not imply a contradiction; actual things are nothing but the best of possibles, everything considered."[5] The 'principle of sufficient reason' as operative here is not an abstract principle of possibilities, but the 'principle of the best', encompassing dialectically good and evil, possibility and actuality: "For what is necessary is so by its essence, since the opposite implies a contradiction; but a contingent which exists owes its existence to the principle of what is best, which is a sufficient reason for the existence of things."[6]

Kant says of (3) the 'monadology', with its consequence that a community of substances can only exist by a *pre-established har-*

3. *Ibid.*, 101.
4. *Specimen Dynamicum* (1695), in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. Leroy Loemker, 2nd ed., Dordrect, 1969, 445.
5. To John Bernoulli, Feb. 21, 1699, Loemker, 513.
6. To Clarke, V, n.9, Loemker, 697.

mony that only objects of pure understanding have that inwardness which has no relation to what is different from itself; phenomena on the other hand must necessarily be represented as having external relations.

But against this it must also be said that the *monad* is a simple substance where all that is different from itself, its predicates, arise from itself. Difference, and this includes the phenomenal, is not done away with; rather, the monad's own self-identity is the source in it of the identical and the different. In Leibniz's mature philosophy he is explicit that substance is a *true unity* "in such a way that everything in it must arise from its own nature by a perfect *spontaneity* with regard to itself, yet by a perfect *conformity* to things without."[7] Furthermore, it is not merely the case that a community of substances can exist only as a pre-established harmony, but there must be the difference of the monad from itself, which appears as phenomena. Substance is not a subject at all apart from its predicates, and the whole distinction between subject and predicates falls within substance itself. Hence, there must be the community of substances in pre-established harmony.[8]

Kant's final criticism is of Leibniz's doctrine of *space* and *time*, or more properly of *perception* as the "representation of a multitude in a unity" in the wholly self-sufficient monad. It is, after all, a direct consequence of this doctrine of perception that 'space' and 'time' are constructs rather than independently existing things: 'space' is the simultaneous order of bodies among themselves, and 'time' the succession of their states, both as this community of substances and the succession of their states are uniquely represented in each monad. As a consequence, Leibniz speaks of 'sensibility' as 'confused thought', and it is for this that Kant accuses him of having 'intellectualized appearances'.

Kant's criticism does not acknowledge the dialectical character of the relation of thought and sensibility in Leibniz. When Leibniz says of sensibility that it is 'confused thought', he is saying that thought and sensibility, these apparently distinct sources of knowledge, are species of thought, that is, that sensibility is the difference of thought itself. They are therefore only apparently distinct sources of knowledge. "In metaphysical strictness", as Leibniz would say, space, time, matter itself are 'well-founded phenomena', phenomena resulting from monads and not simply from my perceptions; and sensibility, as different from under-

7. "A New System on the Nature and Communication of Substances", Loemker, 457.
8. Cf. Robert McRae, "As Though Only God and It Existed", in Michael Hooker, ed., *Leibniz: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, Minneapolis, 1982, 79-89.

standing, is not unrelated to it, but is thought's own difference from itself. Sensibility is not nothing in this relation, or mere illusion: "I showed him [Abbe Foucher] that the truth of sensible things consisted only in the connection of phenomena, which must have its reason and is that which distinguishes them from dreams. . And the connection of the phenomena which guarantees the *truths of fact* in respect to sensible things outside of us, is verified by means of the *truths of reason*."[9]

In every case, we have shown that the principles of Leibniz's philosophy have a dialectical structure which Kant has ignored. This is, of course, no answer to Kant's criticism. Although Leibniz speaks of substance as the underlying unity of noumenon and phenomenon, which Kant ignores in the *Critique*, Kant's objection is from a wholly other standpoint. As he says:

> If we here wished to resort to the usual subterfuge, maintaining as regards *realitates noumena* that they at least do not act in opposition to each other, it would be incumbent on us to produce an example of such pure and non-sensuous reality, that it may be discerned whether such a concept represents something or nothing. But no example can be obtained otherwise than from experience, which never yields more than phenomena.[10]

It is required that we try to state unambiguously this difference of standpoint.

M.J. Scott-Taggart has presented in a short paper to the Third International Kant Congress[11] a striking account and example of the conceptual displacement which made the *Critique* a revolutionary project. He says, "In place of talk about things represented we get talk about the representings of things, in place of talk about God, we have an analogous role played by talk about man." To dramatize the point, he takes a sentence from the *Critique*:

> The transcendental unity of apperception forms out of all possible appearances, which can stand alongside one another in one experience, a connection of all these representations according to laws.[12]

He suggests these substitutions: for 'transcendental unity of apperception' read 'God'; for 'appearances' and 'representations',

---

9. *New Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, IV,ii,9, trans. Alfred Langley, 3rd ed., La Salle, Ill., 1949, 421.
10. *Critique*, B339(a).
11. Martin J. Scott-Taggart, "The Ptolemaic Counter-Revolution", *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress*, edl Lewis White Beck, Dordrect-Holland, 1972, 501.
12. *Critique*, A108.

'substance'; for 'experience', substitute 'world'. And a new sentence is produced:

> God forms out of all possible substances which can stand alongside one another in one world a connection of all these substances according to laws.

This could easily be thought to have been written by Leibniz.[13]

Now this transformation is spoken of in various ways, as a movement from metaphysics to epistemology, or from substance to subjectivity. In that movement, it is argued here, there is something gained and something lost. Perhaps the most enlightening account for our purposes of this transformation comes from Kant himself, in his response to Eberhard, titled *On a Discovery According to which any New Critique of Pure Reason has been made Superfluous by an Earlier One*,[14] published in 1790. The essay explicitly concerns the relation of the Leibnizian philosophy to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant in his analysis claims that in some manner Leibniz anticipated the critical philosophy. However, it must be said also that the critical philosophy, though a transformation of the philosophy of substance of the seventeenth century, is not comprehensive of this philosophy in its mature statement in Leibniz. Thus, Leibniz stands at the threshold, not having attained the principle of subjectivity of the critical philosophy, but calling it forth; it is not a threshold he would easily cross, intoxicated as he was with divine ideas beyond the comprehension of the eighteenth century.

Leibniz's philosophy suffered greatly in the hands of his alleged followers and interpreters. The Wolffian Johann August Eberhard's attack on the Kantian philosophy claimed that it was a second-rate, degenerate form of the Leibnizian philosophy, and Kant found he not only had to defend himself but Leibniz too from the misinterpretation of his alleged disciple. In *On a Discovery*, Kant tries to clarify Leibniz's true doctrines and suggests there that the whole of the Leibnizian philosophy can be found in three original, defining principles, the principle of sufficient reason, the monadology, and the doctrine of the pre-established harmony, three principles attacked by opponents who did not understand him, and here so misinterpreted by Eberhard as to cause Kant to exclaim, "God protect us only from our friends; as for our enemies, we can take care of them ourselves."[15]

What, asks Kant, is the 'principle of sufficient reason' in Leibniz? Those who would interpret it logically, i.e. that every proposition must have a reason, have reduced it to the principle of

13. Scott-Taggart, 501.
14. Trans. by Henry Allison in his *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy*, Baltimore, 1973, 107-160.
15. *On a Discovery*, Allison, 157.

contradiction (as the Wolffians do). But if it is interpreted in a real or transcendental sense as "Every *thing* must have a reason", then this itself is a synthetic proposition and could not, as Eberhard claimed, itself be the principle of synthetic judgments. Then Kant gives to it the 'subjective turn': Leibniz should be understood as meaning nothing more than that it is necessary to add to the principle of contradiction (as the principle of analytic judgments) still another principle, namely that of synthetic judgments. That Leibniz did not properly formulate this principle of synthetic judgments Kant would not hold against him.[16] But is this Kantian reconstruction of Leibniz correct? That Leibniz meant his principle of sufficient reason to be the principle of what Kant calls synthetic judgments is partly confirmed in the *Monadology*: truths of reason are known in the principle of contradiction, and truths of fact in the principle of sufficient reason. But Leibniz also says that in all true propositions the predicate is in the subject (that is, they are all analytic); and further that for every proposition, necessary or contingent, there is a sufficient reason for its being so and not otherwise.

Leibniz's monads, the second element Kant discusses, could be interpreted idealistically and correctly: then one would say that monads are pure intelligible substances, metaphysical 'points' as it were. Or, from the side of nature, they could be given a physical interpretation, as Wolff did, and then some monads are incoherently regarded as the elements of things, the 'atoms of nature'. Kant says properly: "He did not mean the physical world, but its substrate which is unknown to us"[17] and adds that Leibniz's followers have taken him too literally in this as well as in his account of sensibility as confused thought. Kant substitutes what he thinks is more in harmony with Leibniz's main purpose, to expose the two distinct sources of knowledge. He gives to these doctrines also the subjective turn: he regards Leibniz as concerned implicitly with his own question, how sensibility and understanding, two distinct sources of knowledge, can be brought together so that experience is possible.

Thirdly, Kant interprets the pre-established harmony not as a mutual conformity of soul and body as two beings which by their nature are completely independent of each other but the harmony between understanding and sensibility. "Without such a

16. Kant formulates it this way: "All synthetic judgments of theoretical knowledge are only possible through the relation of a given concept to an intuition: if the synthetic judgment is experiential, the underlying intuition must be empirical; if it is a judgment *a priori* the intuition must be pure." Kant to Reinhold, May 12, 1789, *Ibid.* 164.
17. *Ibid.*, 158.

harmony," he says, "objects could not be taken up by us into the unity of consciousness and enter into experience, and would therefore be nothing for us."[18] No one can further explain why these sources of knowledge agree so well, as if nature were deliberately organized in view of our power of comprehension. In naming the ground of this relation *pre-established*, pre-determined, Leibniz did not explain, nor did he wish to explain this agreement but only to indicate that we must conceive a certain purposiveness in the arrangement. If Leibniz leads us to imagine he meant this as a pre-determination of externally existing things, it is again more in accordance with his true intentions if we impose on this too the subjective principle in the form of the harmony of the powers of mind in us. Kant concludes that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the true apology for Leibniz, and his so-called partisans are incapable of recognizing beyond what the philosopher actually said what he really meant to say.

What is gained in this transformation? Kant's conclusion that we can never know the thing-in-itself, but only as it appears to us, is not, after all, simply destructive. Rather, Kant is moved to write the *Critique of Pure Reason* to show under what conditions it is possible to make true judgments, judgments about what is so as opposed to what merely seems to be so. And he came to the view that the only way we could do this, the only way that synthetic *a priori* judgments are possible, is to limit ourselves in making such judgments to the phenomenal world.

It is more secure, because more certain, to establish truths about the appearances of things than about things themselves, since there is an incorrigible element about propositions dealing with appearances when these are formulated with care, as Descartes shows in the Third Meditation: "Now as far as ideas are concerned, provided that they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false; for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter."[19] Moreover, in every case where I know a proposition p, p is true; but it is not *prima facie* the case that where p is true, it can be said that I know that p is true. Thus, in general, every proof of p is more directly and intimately a proof of one's knowledge of p. For these and similar reasons, it can be said that the critical philosophy is more certain than the dogmatic philosophy of Kant's predecessors; and in matters such as Kant considers, what is less certain, i.e. doubtful, is utterly undermined. To put it another way, one

18. *Ibid.*, 159.
19. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham *et al.*, Cambridge, 1984, Vol.II, 26.

might say that the Divine guarantee of truth gives way to a more immediate form of certainty within self-consciousness itself; and this was not something that Descartes himself could find in ideas considered simply as 'forms of consciousness'. Rather, he abandonned that division of ideas, and looked instead to their content, where he found an idea which testified to an objectivity external to his self-consciousness, true whether he thought it or not. Remaining wholly within self-consciousness, the Kantian certainty cannot extend to an objectivity which is true whether he thinks it or not.

And what is lost of the Leibnizian philosophy in this Kantian revolution? There is the obvious loss of all the content of metaphysics, of the whole philosophy of substance: the existence of God is a mere hypothesis, a postulate of practical reason; the 'self', since it is not observable, is not real; nor is the 'world', as the 'sum total of all phenomena'. If some will not admit these as losses, at least it must be granted that if they are excised from Leibniz's philosophy there is little, if anything, left. The Kantian philosophy, whose principle is self-consciousness, in this manner stands opposed to the Leibnizian philosophy, whose principle is substance.[20]

But there is another loss to which we have already alluded. As noted above, the Kantian philosophy is a kind of conceptual displacement of the Leibnizian, where certain words regularly replaced (*mutatis mutandis*, one might say) in Kantian statements will yield Leibnizian statements. Kant himself suggests such a displacement in *On a Discovery*. It cannot be denied that virtually all of Kant's distinctions, the *a priori* and *a posteriori*, analytic and synthetic, the noumenal and phenomenal, the true unity of the subject and derivative unity of everything else, are found, in a somewhat different form, in Leibniz. Kant's chief interests come out of Leibniz, even if as reaction to him. Indeed, his reinterpretation here can be accepted as the expression of Leibniz's philosophy from the side of subjectivity. One might say that in some manner Kant grasps the truth of the Leibnizian philosophy but not its whole truth.

For consider more closely the Kantian interpretations of Leibniz in his answer to Eberhard: they are in each case a replacement of what is essentially a dialectical concept with a dualism. In Kant, the principle of contradiction and that of sufficient reason are irreconcilably two, each ruling over its own domain: the one, the principle of analytic judgment, producing mere self-consistency;

20. Cf. Hegel's division of Modern Philosophy in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

the other now interpreted as the principle of synthetic judgments. For Leibniz, in every true proposition, analytic or synthetic, the predicate is in the subject, as in every monad, all that differentiates it is given in it; and the principle of sufficient reason for him reigns over necessity and contingency. In Kant, phenomenon and noumenon, sensibility and thought, subject and object are each in isolation from the other. In Leibniz, there is the noumenal, the realm of the monad, and there is the phenomenal, the appearance of things; there is the realm of pure activity in the monad, the production from itself of all its predicates, and there is the 'kingdom of nature', where activity and passivity seem to be isolated from each other. But for Leibniz, as shown above, the difference between noumenon and phenomenon is the noumenon's own difference, and the difference between activity and passivity is founded in activity itself.

Again, for both Leibniz and Kant sensibility is essentially receptive and thought essentially spontaneous. But Leibniz regards sensibility not as isolated from thought, but as the difference of thought from itself. Sensibility for Leibniz is, therefore, related to phenomena in its apparent opposition to thought; and thought, as the unity of this difference of sensibility and understanding is thus primarily attached to the noumenal. Moreover, since thought is the principle of sensibility as its own difference, since also sensible things are opaque, obscure and indistinct, whereas those of pure thought are clear and distinct, it can be said that the clear and distinct is the principle of itself and the obscure and opaque. Sensibility, the phenomenal world, what is obscure and opaque is not annulled in that relation, but is known in its true nature in thought, the noumenal world, and what is clear and distinct. The Kantian doctrine of understanding and sensibility, of spontaneity and receptivity, as two different roots of knowledge which are drawn into harmony only by restricting spontaneous thought to receptive sensibility cannot go so far as this.[21]

Thus, there are elements of the Leibnizian philosophy which do not find expression in the Kantian philosophy, clearly because the Kantian philosophy denies all validity to these dialectical structures in Leibniz. Still, a philosophy of self-consciousness could be constructed which rehabilitates those elements of the Leibnizian philosophy lost in Kant. It is significant to note that Fichte, in

21. For the fundamental recognition of these Leibnizian categories as 'encompassing universals', for the application of this concept of a universal as the principle of itself and its opposite to 'force', to thought and sensibility, I am indebted to Josef Konig, now deceased, in an article which appeared in translation in 1984: 'Leibniz's System' (trans. by E. Miller), *Contemporary German Philosophy*, Vol. 4, 1984, 104-125.

setting aside the 'thing-in-itself' to produce a more comprehensive philosophy from the one principle of self-consciousness, revived those dialectical structures found in Leibniz. These words of Schelling, commended by Fichte, are offered here as evidence of this rehabilitation:

> The time has come when his [Leibniz's] philosophy can be reestablished. His mind despised the fetters of the schools; small wonder that he has survived amongst us only in a few kindred spirits and among the rest has long become a stranger. He belonged to the few who also treat science as a free activity, who see everything, and eventhe truth *beneath* them. He had in himself the universal *spirit of the world*, which reveals itself in the most manifold forms; and where it enters, life expands. It is therefore doubly insufferable that only now are the right words for his philosophy supposed to have been found, and that the Kantian school should force its inventions upon him — alleging that he says things the precise opposite of everything he taught. There is nothing from which Leibniz could have been more remote than the speculative chimera of a world of *things-in-themselves*, which, known and intuited by no mind, yet affects us and produces all our ideas. The first thought from which he set out was: 'that the ideas of external things would have arisen in the soul by virtue of her own laws *as in a particular world*, even though nothing were present but God (the infinite) and the soul (the intuition of the infinite).' He still asserted in his latest writings the absolute impossibility that an external cause should produce an effect upon the inwardness of the mind; he asserted, accordingly, that all alterations, all change of perceptions and presentations in a mind, could proceed only from an inner principle. When Leibniz said this he spoke to philosophers. Today some people have intruded into philosophizing, who have feeling for all else, but not for philosophy. Accordingly, if among ourselves it is said that no ideas could arise in us through external causes, there is no end of astonishment. Nowadays it is valid in philosophy to believe that the monads have windows, through which things climb in and out.[22]

22. F.W.J. Schelling, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol Harris and Peter Heath, Cambridge, 1988, 16; commended by Ficte in the second introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre, Werke*, i, 515 note. The relevant references are found in notes by Robert Latta in his translation of *Monadology*, Oxford, 1898, 179-180, n.2.

If there is a double loss of the Leibnizian philosophy in Kant, there remains the whole loss of the principle of substance even in this rehabilitation, a loss which is not recovered until Hegel.[23]

Memorial University
of Newfoundland

23. Cf. "In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject* . . . [n. 17]. That the True is actual only as system, or that Substance is essentially Subject, is expressed in the representation of the Absolute as *Spirit*. . . [n. 25] *Phenomenology*, Preface, trans. Arthur Miller, Oxford, 1977, 9-10, 14.