Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz

Philosopher and mathematician working through courts, libraries and learned networks

Paris, September 1675. A machine for walking on water has been demonstrated on the Seine. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, twenty-nine, responds by writing a proposal. What if demonstrations like this could become a permanent enterprise? Bring together ingenious machines, optical illusions, music, animals, performances, scientific experiments, and games. Give inventors somewhere to exhibit their work. Charge admission. Rent out shops. Use the proceeds to support further discoveries. Employ the people who can actually make these things: carpenters, clockmakers, painters, instrument builders, printers, mathematicians. Arrange the pleasures so that an audience looking for entertainment finds itself drawn into knowledge.[1]

The memorandum is speculative, exuberant, and surprisingly attentive to operations. Leibniz considers partners, privileges, advance payments, counterfeit tickets, expansion into other cities, and the danger that a powerful patron might take over once the enterprise succeeds. He also imagines concealed devices for watching and listening to visitors. The same arrangement that cultivates curiosity could gather intelligence for the state.

Here is an unusually good entrance into his life. The man who will become a canonical philosopher is trying to assemble people, money, technique, authority, and attention into an institution that does not yet exist. The proposal contains generosity and calculation, intellectual ambition and commercial appetite, confidence in improvement and an accommodating relationship with power. It is also unfinished. We cannot explain it by saying that its author already knows he will be Leibniz.

Leibniz’s vocation is the effort to make knowledge consequential: to give an insight a form in which it can be developed, communicated, financed, tested, and put to work. Sometimes that form is a mathematical sign. Sometimes it is a letter, a legal argument, a machine, an index, a historical edition, or a society of learned people. His philosophy belongs inside this activity, although it cannot simply be reduced to its institutional circumstances.

To approach him as a contemporary is to restore the openness of these undertakings. His employers can decline a proposal. An expert can expose something he has misunderstood. A machine can fail under conditions that his drawing did not anticipate. A prestigious appointment can remain unavailable. A correspondent can disappear for months. He must decide which claims to publish, which to reserve, whom to trust, and how much of his life to spend making an unfinished thing work.

Audrey Borowski’s Leibniz in His World: The Making of a Savant provides a particularly

useful orientation here. Its concentration on 1672–1679 returns us to a young man acquiring positions and capabilities amid the social demands of learned and courtly life. It resists treating those years merely as the delivery mechanism for a philosophy already waiting to emerge. This profile takes that problem of becoming seriously, then follows it through the remaining career.[2]

Research scope: sources checked through 19 September 2026. The profile draws on Leibniz's writings and correspondence, digitized historical texts, scholarly editions and their descriptions, archival and institutional records, specialist articles, and accessible portions of modern scholarship. The introduction to Borowski's published book and selected passages of her underlying Oxford thesis were consulted; this is not a claim to have read the entire published book or every work listed for further reading. Proposed institutions, working experiments, surviving objects, and completed publications are distinguished. Interpretive connections are identified as such. Historical present tense is used to keep decisions open, without inventing scenes or private thoughts.

1. Leipzig: a legal and learned inheritance

Leibniz is born in Leipzig on 1 July 1646, two years before the Peace of Westphalia ends the Thirty Years' War. His family belongs to the educated professional world of the city. His father, Friedrich, is a professor of moral philosophy and a jurist; his mother, Catharina Schmuck, comes from a legal academic family. Friedrich dies while Gottfried is a child. The paternal library remains an important resource for an unusually eager reader, including histories, Christian authors, and the older philosophical tradition.[3]

This is an inheritance of access rather than an escape from institutions. Books, Latin, learned professions, and religious controversy are already close at hand. The later thinker who moves among competing systems first acquires the means to read across them. His education also makes it difficult to regard jurisprudence as a peripheral day job. Law is one of the environments in which he learns what an argument is for: distinguishing cases, establishing a right, resolving uncertainty, and making a decision binding upon people who may disagree.

He enters Leipzig University in 1661. His early philosophical work concerns individuation: what makes an individual the individual it is. Jacob Thomasius supplies an important scholarly relationship; a period at Jena brings him into contact with Erhard Weigel's mathematically oriented teaching. After Leipzig, his legal studies culminate at Altdorf in a dissertation defended in 1666 and a doctorate awarded in 1667.[4, 5]

There is a temptation to recognize the entire mature philosopher in these beginnings: individuality, mathematics, law, reconciliation. That makes the continuity too easy. A topic encountered by a gifted student is not yet a lifetime commitment, and a legal qualification does not dictate a particular intellectual future. The formative advantage is a repertoire. Leibniz can read scholastic arguments, work with legal distinctions, engage new

mechanical explanations, and address learned people in the languages their institutions recognize.

The war's aftermath is also a condition of possibility. The Holy Roman Empire is a world of overlapping jurisdictions, confessional divisions, territorial rulers, cities, universities, and courts. There is no single national institution into which his abilities must fit. Multiplicity creates openings for someone who can travel between domains and explain their interests to one another. It also makes his livelihood dependent on particular patrons and on the durability of their political arrangements.[6]

2. Combination, cases, and the search for an art of discovery

The young Leibniz's Dissertatio de arte combinatoria appears in 1666. Its ambition exceeds the calculation of combinations. He is interested in whether complex thoughts can be analyzed into simpler elements, and whether their recombination can become an organized method for discovering and demonstrating truths. His early legal work similarly asks how complicated cases can be handled through distinctions and ordered procedures.[7]

The attraction is practical as well as philosophical. A discipline that depends too heavily on an individual's intuition is difficult to teach, check, or extend. If reasoning can be given an explicit form, someone else can inspect the steps. A well-designed representation can also reveal an operation that ordinary language conceals.

That ambition will survive enormous changes in the details of his thought. It will not produce a completed universal language or a general procedure that settles every human disagreement. What it does produce is a persistent habit of asking whether a problem becomes more manageable when its elements are represented differently. The distinction matters. An unrealized universal program can coexist with highly successful local inventions.

There is a related danger: the confidence that a difficult social or intellectual dispute will yield once its terms have been properly arranged. The young combinatorial imagination can understate how much work is involved in deciding what the elements are, which differences matter, and who gets to set the terms. Those difficulties recur later in religious negotiations, scientific institutions, and the dream of a calculus of reasoning. Modern histories of logic accordingly distinguish Leibniz's surviving projects from the much later developments with which they are often retrospectively identified.[8]

Leibniz's strongest practical achievement in this area will be a form of calculation that does not require universal agreement about everything. Differential and integral notation will make a particular class of difficult operations available to a community. That more limited success is worth keeping in view when we encounter his largest promises.

3. Mainz: learning to make intelligence useful to power

Leibniz’s route out of academic qualification runs through Johann Christian von Boineburg, a former minister and influential intermediary, and the service of Johann Philipp von Schönborn, elector of Mainz. From 1668 to 1672 he works in the Mainz environment, where legal reform, imperial politics, religion, and diplomacy meet. Boineburg supplies patronage, introductions, and concrete responsibilities.[9, 10]

This relationship teaches a demanding form of intellectual translation. A proposal must be interesting to the person capable of enabling it. An argument about knowledge may have to become an argument about a ruler’s reputation. A plan for religious agreement must address the security of institutions. A legal memorandum has to enter an existing contest over authority. The work is not merely to possess ideas but to establish their relevance at the point where decisions are made.

It would be misleading to call all this camouflage for a private philosophical life. Leibniz takes law, religion, and political order seriously. Yet the circumstances also reward strategic presentation. He learns to frame the same broad ambition in different registers, matching the opportunity and the addressee. That is a source of versatility; it also complicates any attempt to infer a single unchanging intention from every memorandum.

His Egyptian project makes the complication unmistakable. In 1671–1672 he develops arguments for Louis XIV to undertake an expedition against Ottoman Egypt. One purpose is to redirect French expansion away from Europe, including the Dutch Republic and the German territories. But the project also imagines strategic and commercial advantages from control of an important junction between Mediterranean and eastern trade.[11]

It is not adequately described as a clever peace plan. Lloyd Strickland’s reconstruction emphasizes the importance of holy war and the hoped-for reconciliation of Christians through a common undertaking. The scheme’s ecumenical promise depends on redirecting violence toward a Muslim power. Egypt appears as an object of European strategic planning, not as a polity whose inhabitants are invited to determine the proposal’s merits.[12]

This is not a minor exception to an otherwise uncomplicated cosmopolitanism. Leibniz can imagine cooperation across deep differences while accepting a hierarchy that determines which differences deserve accommodation. The moral horizon of his practice is expansive and bounded at once.

4. Paris: gaining admission before having a position

Leibniz arrives in Paris in 1672. The Egyptian proposal helps explain the journey, but the city soon presents a much wider field of activity. Louis XIV’s government has made learned work part of royal prestige; Colbert’s administrative world, the Académie des sciences, libraries, religious houses, private collections, and scholarly households offer different forms of access. An introduction can matter as much as a formal credential.[13]

Borowski’s underlying thesis gives the arrival a useful material specificity. Leibniz’s responsibilities include business for Boineburg, efforts to obtain money owed to his patron, and subsequently the education of Boineburg’s son Philipp Wilhelm. Jean-François Ferrand helps him learn about publications and experiments and connects him with Antoine Arnauld. Pierre de Carcavy matters as a possible route toward the resources and people around Colbert. Access is mediated; it does not follow automatically from arriving with an ambitious diplomatic paper.[14]

These are not background errands beneath the attention of a future philosopher. They determine how long he can remain, where he can go, and which people have reasons to see him. An emerging vocation takes shape through obligations that do not yet look like its central work.

Boineburg dies in December 1672; the elector of Mainz dies early the next year. Leibniz’s original support is therefore disrupted almost as soon as Paris begins opening to him. The problem becomes how to stay in a place where he is learning rapidly without a settled position that makes staying possible.[15]

A city can be intellectually indispensable and economically provisional. That combination helps explain the intensity of the Paris years. Learning, seeking introductions, demonstrating inventions, cultivating patrons, and looking for employment happen together. The letters discussed in Borowski’s thesis show negotiations over possible posts and terms, including efforts to preserve room for learned work. These possibilities do not all mature into appointments.[16]

This is the first major reason to suspend the familiar image of the universal genius. In Paris he is also a newcomer with uneven preparation. He can bring considerable intelligence to a subject without yet knowing what its best practitioners already know. What distinguishes him is partly the speed with which he turns that embarrassment into study.

5. Huygens, papers, and an accelerated mathematical education

Christiaan Huygens is decisive. Leibniz does not enter their relationship as a mathematician already in possession of the methods for which he will be remembered. Huygens directs him toward demanding problems and reading. Work on sums and differences, infinite series, curves, and quadratures becomes a sustained education. Pascal’s mathematical papers and other recent investigations form part of the material from which he learns.[17]

The Academy edition’s volume on Differences, Sequences, Series makes visible an apprenticeship that a retrospective list of discoveries conceals. It gathers studies, excerpts, and drafts from 1672–1676. A companion volume on infinitesimal mathematics documents the further development of techniques for tangents, quadratures, and related problems.

The manuscripts record work spread across attempts and revisions, rather than a finished method appearing in one inspirational moment.[18, 19]

Paris gives him access to more than books already available for purchase. Papers, conversations, challenges, and introductions circulate through personal relationships. The distinction between private investigation and public knowledge is consequently unstable. A result may be known in one circle without being printed; a manuscript may be shown without permission to circulate everything it contains. These conditions enable learning and later make priority disputes combustible.

Huygens’ s importance is therefore not exhausted by the word influence. He supplies standards. He can identify the next difficulty, recognize an advance, and expose a gap in preparation. Leibniz needs someone whose competence makes his own lack of competence productive.

In 1673 Leibniz also visits London and presents his calculating-machine project to the Royal Society. He becomes a fellow that year. The episode joins two kinds of credibility: the promise of an ingenious device and membership in an institution through which learned claims circulate. Neither guarantees the reliability of every mechanism or the correctness of every mathematical assertion.[20, 21]

The vocation that emerges is neither solitary discovery nor mere sociability. The relationships matter because they put substantive work under pressure. An introduction opens the door; the problem on the other side still has to be solved.

6. Calculus: inventing a form other people can think with

By the autumn of 1675 Leibniz has made the advances in notation and method that stand at the centre of his invention of the calculus. The surviving Paris papers allow historians to reconstruct the development of the integral sign and differential notation. The first publication of his differential method comes in 1684, in the Leipzig journal Acta eruditorum, under a title promising a new method for maxima, minima, and tangents.[22, 23]

The practical achievement is easier to see if we begin with what the notation lets a user do. A curve can be investigated through relations between changes in its variables. Operations on those relations can be written compactly and repeated. Differentiation and integration become connected procedures, not merely separate ingenious solutions to individual geometrical puzzles.

The notation is not an ornamental wrapper around a discovery. It helps organize the discovery and makes further work possible. The signs preserve distinctions that matter while allowing a complicated operation to be handled without reimagining its entire geometrical basis every time. There is an economy here: the written form takes over part of the burden previously carried by attention.

But useful notation does not make its first exposition transparent. Clara Silvia Roero’ s

study of the early calculus papers emphasizes the compressed character of the 1684 publication and the difficulties facing its readers. The method's subsequent development depends on other mathematicians, particularly the Bernoulli brothers, and on exposition and teaching as well as invention.[24]

That is a major difference between a private breakthrough and a working intellectual practice. A method needs examples, extensions, objections, competent users, and reasons for those users to invest in learning it. Publication establishes a claim and creates an opening; it does not complete the social life of the invention.

The relationship to his broader ambition is suggestive without needing to become a claim that everything was planned in advance. Here is a successful instance of making reasoning more transferable by changing its written form. The universal art of discovery remains unfinished, but a particular symbolic practice acquires a life beyond its maker.

It is also a warning against treating influence as resemblance. Modern mathematical notation descends through actual use, teaching, editions, and modification. The much larger claim that Leibniz therefore already possessed modern computing, formal logic, or an information society compresses several different histories into a flattering origin story. His achievement becomes more precise when those histories are allowed to remain different.[25]

7. The Paris spectacle: a complete institution in the conditional tense

The September 1675 memorandum, Drôle de pensée touchant une nouvelle sorte de représentations, deserves to be read as a serious working document. Its pleasures are not a diversion from Leibniz's intellectual ambition. They are the proposed means of drawing people, resources, and inventions into a common enterprise.[26]

Its starting point is the audience. People will come to see something extraordinary. The enterprise must continually offer enough novelty to sustain that appetite. Optical effects, moving figures, music, dramatic performances, scientific demonstrations, and unusual animals are not assigned to sharply separated cultural departments. They belong to a single field of things that can attract curiosity.

Its next problem is production. An impressive display is made by people with specific abilities. Leibniz lists artists and technical workers alongside mathematicians and engineers. The memorandum's human world is therefore broader than an academy of authors. A machine's operation, a room's arrangement, a convincing illusion, a printed account, and an audience's comfort require different forms of expertise.

The proposed institution also offers inventors a way to make their work visible and earn something from it. Exhibition becomes an intermediary between discovery and support. An invention need not wait for a learned treatise to find an audience; a paying public might

give it a different route into existence. Conversely, an audience's appetite could help support investigations whose results are not immediately saleable.

Leibniz thinks about this circulation in detail. There will be premises, concessions, shops, partners, admission arrangements, and potentially branches elsewhere. Advance ticket purchases provide money before the performance is delivered. Numbering and other controls address misuse. Exclusive privileges protect the undertaking. The funding is imagined as a structure rather than as one benevolent person's indefinite generosity.

Yet independence is conditional. The enterprise needs legal permission and protection. Leibniz recognizes that a powerful person could appropriate a successful project; this does not lead him to imagine an operation wholly outside political authority. He tries to arrange a relationship with that authority in which the undertaking can survive and its initiators retain a place.

The games are especially revealing. They might attract people who would never enter a scientific institution for instruction alone. They might also generate income and become objects of mathematical study. Pleasure, calculation, and moral improvement are supposed to reinforce one another. Leibniz's confidence that appetite can be redirected is part of the proposal's energy.

Then the memorandum darkens. Concealed mirrors and tubes would allow an observer to see or hear without being noticed. The entertainment venue becomes a possible instrument of political knowledge. The institution that awakens its visitors' curiosity also imagines making them legible to someone else.

There is no need to translate this into a prediction of contemporary surveillance businesses. The document already contains its own consequential tension. Knowledge is a public benefit; knowledge about the public is an advantage for rulers. Leibniz can move between these propositions without treating their collision as a reason to abandon the scheme.

Nothing in the surviving proposal establishes that this institution was built. Its significance lies in the specificity of the attempt. It lets us watch him treat cultural form, revenue, technical labor, intellectual progress, and political protection as parts of one design. It also shows how far a design can advance on paper while remaining dependent on commitments that nobody has yet made.[27, 28]

8. Leaving Paris without having finished becoming

In October 1676 Leibniz leaves Paris for a position in Hanover. The journey takes him through London and the Netherlands. In November he meets Spinoza in The Hague, after earlier contact with people in Spinoza's circle, including Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus. They discuss philosophy; the meeting belongs to a continuing exchange of arguments and manuscripts, not a single encounter that neatly settles Leibniz's relationship to Spinozism.[29, 30]

This is a useful moment to refuse the itinerary of a museum visitor. Leibniz is not collecting meetings with people who already belong to a common canon. Spinoza's writings raise live questions about God, necessity, freedom, and the authority of religion. Their implications are intellectually and socially dangerous. Leibniz has reasons to investigate them and reasons to resist them.

The later philosophy's insistence on individual substances, contingency, and divine choice gains definition through such alternatives. But disagreement does not mean that the opponent contributes nothing. A powerful argument can force the reconstruction of one's position even when its conclusion remains unacceptable.

Nor does the move to Hanover mean that his Paris education is complete. The late 1670s bring intensive further work on motion, force, logic, a general science, and binary arithmetic. The chronology gathered by Maria Rosa Antognazza is a reminder that leaving the city does not close an apprenticeship and inaugurate a fixed system. The problems travel with him and change under new conditions.[31]

What Paris has supplied is a much enlarged sense of the possible, together with people and techniques for pursuing it. What Hanover supplies is a durable, if troublesome, arrangement for sustaining a working life.

9. The Hanover bargain: continuity in exchange for service

Leibniz enters the service of Duke Johann Friedrich in 1676. After the duke's death in 1679, he serves Ernst August, and subsequently Georg Ludwig. The work combines library responsibilities, legal and political advice, historical research, and scientific projects. Additional relationships and appointments, including the Wolfenbüttel librarianship from 1691, extend the institutional base without abolishing his obligations in Hanover.[32, 33]

The arrangement makes a long career possible. It gives him standing, resources, access, and a reason to correspond with people who might otherwise have little cause to attend to a private scholar. It also makes his time contestable. His employer has purchased service, not an unconditional subsidy for every interesting problem.

This is the economic fact that the image of the isolated polymath obscures. Intellectual freedom is negotiated through a portfolio of duties and relationships. A successful technical project may justify further support; a historical commission may authorize travel; a connection at another court may increase his options. But every additional undertaking can become an explanation he owes to someone already paying him.

The historical work eventually makes the conflict explicit. Official restrictions on travel in 1704 and again in 1711 press him to remain in Hanover and finish the history of the ruling house. Movement that Leibniz regards as useful to a broad program can appear to his employer as avoidance of an overdue deliverable.[34]

Neither perspective is exhausted by a caricature. An employer can constrain inquiry; an

employee can also overextend himself. Leibniz’ s ambitions generate more work than his available arrangements can reliably absorb. His career’ s continuity depends on maintaining that imbalance without letting it become a complete rupture.

We should therefore distinguish several economies of his practice: salaried service, occasional patronage, prestigious affiliations, proposed commercial income, and exchanges of information or assistance. They are not interchangeable. A title does not necessarily furnish a laboratory budget. A promising scheme does not constitute revenue. A respected correspondent does not become an available assistant simply because the work would benefit from one.

10. Machines, phosphorus, and the people who know how

The calculating machine is the most familiar physical expression of Leibniz’ s ambition. He wants arithmetic operations to become mechanical operations. The stepped-drum mechanism offers a way to represent numerical values through a repeatable movement; the machine is intended to carry out all four basic arithmetic operations. Building it, however, is a prolonged collaboration with the capacities and limits of precision manufacture.[35]

The surviving instrument cannot responsibly be summarized as a brilliant drawing that never worked. The Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek describes it as functional in light of more recent research. Other technical histories emphasize difficulties with carrying and the precision required. Leibniz University Hannover’ s account distinguishes the historical construction from a modern reconstruction whose parameters were adjusted to make its operation more robust.[36, 37, 38]

The significant distinction is between demonstrating a principle, making a particular object operate, and producing a reliable, maintainable object for repeated use. These are different accomplishments. The machine’ s hundreds of hand-made components make clear why a mathematical scheme cannot simply dictate its material realization. Small tolerances accumulate; a carry that succeeds in one circumstance may present a harder problem in another.

To understand the vocation, the craftsperson belongs inside the invention. Someone must translate a desired relation into parts, fit them together, and diagnose what happens under motion. The conceptual author remains important, but his knowledge does not contain every judgment needed to make the object work.

The phosphorus episode offers a less flattering example of the same dependence. Hennig Brand discovers the substance in Hamburg in 1669 through work involving urine. Its extraordinary luminosity makes it valuable as a demonstration and as a secret. The subsequent circulation of the discovery involves figures including Johann Daniel Crafft, Johann Kunckel, and Leibniz. Brand’ s knowledge becomes the object of purchases, negotiations, and efforts to secure patronage; he eventually works in Hanover under difficult conditions.[39, 40]

Here Leibniz acts as an intermediary around someone else's technical discovery. The history concerns who knows the process, who can reproduce it, who controls access, and who receives payment or credit. A universal commitment to advancing knowledge does not by itself distribute the benefits fairly among those who produce it.

The machine and phosphorus therefore belong together without being identical cases. Both expose the insufficiency of the formula "he had the idea." An idea's practical life depends on bodies, materials, techniques, money, and permissions that no single intelligence can simply supply by thinking harder.

[External image / 外部圖片] Historical photograph of Leibniz's stepped reckoner
Leibniz's stepped reckoner, reproduced in a 1921 history of calculating machines. The surviving object gives a material counterpart to the profile's discussion of mechanical calculation. J. A. V. Turck, Origin of Modern Calculating Machines (1921), p. 133 / Wikimedia Commons · Public domain in the United States (1921 publication); other jurisdictions may differ · Image source

11. The Harz mines: the work has to keep going

The Harz mining projects occupy a substantial portion of Leibniz's time in the early 1680s. He develops schemes involving wind power, water management, and machinery for an industry in which drainage is a continuing material necessity. Andre Wakefield's reconstruction counts more than thirty visits and almost three years spent in the mining region across 1680–1686. This is sustained involvement, not a passing memorandum.[41]

The mines are an especially severe setting for an inventor's ambition. Water must be managed continuously; a proposed improvement has to fit a landscape, an existing organization, established equipment, and the people responsible for keeping production going. The university's account of the projects describes technical experiments and the mining administration's concerns about dependable operation and returns.[42]

Wakefield's central historiographical intervention is to put competing accounts beside one another. Leibniz's own reports and later narratives can make him the visionary obstructed by conservative officials. Administrative records restore other interests and criteria of success. A machine may be ingenious while still being a poor investment for the people obliged to rely on it.[43]

The strongest interpretation is not that practical men necessarily know better than theorists. Existing organizations can resist worthwhile change. But the refusal of a proposal is evidence to investigate, not proof of intellectual inferiority. Someone answerable for drainage, workers, costs, and continued operation is entitled to ask questions that do not appear in the inventor's account of the mechanism.

This episode establishes a limit to Leibniz's method of connection. He can see an analogy between mechanical problems, import an idea from another domain, and design a new

arrangement. What he cannot infer from the analogy is the full burden of operating it in a particular place.

It also changes the meaning of failure. A rejected or unsuccessful intervention is not necessarily wasted thought; it can generate further technical understanding. But that does not entitle the biographer to redescribe an unsuccessful project as a practical success. Its costs were borne in the present by an institution and its workers. The later richness of Leibniz’ s ideas does not reimburse them.

12. The historian’ s commission grows beneath his feet

Leibniz’ s work on the history of the House of Brunswick-Lüneburg begins from a dynastic purpose. Establishing descent and connections has political and legal value. His journey through southern Germany, Austria, and Italy in 1687–1690 searches archives and other evidence relevant to the ruling house’ s ancestry. The past is part of the machinery through which present claims become credible.[44]

The research nevertheless grows beyond a celebratory family narrative. A recent study of his work on the ancestors of Azzo II of Este reconstructs a long investigation extending from the initial research of the 1680s to exchanges with Ludovico Antonio Muratori in the final years. Historical knowledge, like mathematics, is made through documentary comparison, correspondence, and disputes over contribution.[45]

This is another correction to the idea that the court historian is simply the philosopher in a degrading disguise. The commission opens a genuine intellectual field. Its difficulty is not imaginary, and the documents can resist the conclusion a patron would prefer. At the same time, the expanding investigation aggravates the problem of completion. An employer wants a history; the researcher keeps encountering prerequisites.

At its most striking, the inquiry reaches beneath human history. Protogaea, composed in the early 1690s and published in full only in 1749, considers the earth’ s formation, minerals, strata, and fossils. Leibniz brings observations associated with mining into an account of the natural setting in which regional history must begin. The work contains serious attempts to explain geological processes alongside claims and illustrations that later inquiry would reject.[46]

The conjunction is revealing. A genealogy leads to archives; a regional history leads toward natural history; mining supplies observations that cannot be kept within the original administrative purpose. His appetite for foundations keeps enlarging the scale of the task.

A sympathetic reading sees an insistence that the object be understood properly. A less sympathetic reading sees a recurrent inability to accept a workable boundary. Both belong in the profile. The same habit that produces an unexpectedly rich investigation can prevent the promised deliverable from arriving.

13. Wolfenbüttel: the intellectual life of a bad index

In a memorandum of June 1695, Leibniz explains what is wrong with the library's finding aids. The author index gives numbers without adequately identifying the works attached to them. A reader seeking a particular book must repeatedly consult the main catalogue. It is difficult to establish quickly whether the book is present, where it is, or which copies are duplicates. A system once sufficient for a smaller collection has become an obstacle as the collection grows.[47]

This is the grand organizer attending to a concrete frustration. A library's value is partly the difference between possessing a book and enabling someone to find and use it. The problem is not solved by adding more books; accumulation can increase the difficulty unless the means of retrieval improve with it.

The memorandum also calls for continuing acquisitions, better indexes, money, and suitable assistance. Leibniz reports work underway on an improved author catalogue and proposes further organization by subject. These proposals should not all be counted as completed reforms merely because he describes their necessity.[48]

What makes the text especially characteristic is the relationship between intellectual and administrative argument. A library should serve inquiry across religion, law, government, medicine, natural knowledge, history, languages, and the arts. Its usefulness enhances the reputation of the princes who maintain it. Leibniz does not ask the patrons to choose between public benefit and their own standing; he tries to make each a reason for supporting the other.[49]

He also understands maintenance as an active expense. A collection allowed to fall behind current inquiry does not remain equally valuable simply because nobody has destroyed it. Preservation and renewal are different responsibilities. This is a durable insight into cultural institutions, made here in the immediate language of a funding request.

The limit is equally visible. The public served by a princely scholarly library is not identical to an unrestricted modern public. Its declared uses include defending rights and clarifying law, but also strengthening the claims of rulers. An organized treasury of knowledge can widen access while reinforcing the institution that owns it.

The librarian's work makes Leibniz's vocation unusually tangible. His concern is not only what may be known. It is how knowledge becomes available at the moment somebody needs to act.

14. Correspondence is a workplace

The Hanover collection contains roughly 15,000 letters from and to about 1,100 correspondents. These are collection estimates, not a claim that Leibniz personally sent 15,000 letters. The larger manuscript estate encompasses tens of thousands of items. Its

scale documents the amount of work conducted through correspondence, drafts, excerpts, memoranda, and working papers.[50]

A letter can ask for a text, circulate a problem, recommend a person, negotiate a post, test an argument, report an experiment, or obtain news. It often does several at once. This makes the correspondence more than evidence about the work. Much of the work happens in it.

The contemporary catalogue of the Academy edition contains more than 70,000 records across different kinds of material. Among them are thousands of short notes and excerpts associated with the historical project, organized through headings and numbering. That is evidence of deliberate retrieval practices, even though no single filing method should be assumed to explain the whole estate.[51]

Leibniz's paper world has different stages of commitment. An excerpt preserves something to use later. A draft tries a formulation. A sent letter makes a claim to a particular person. A printed article addresses a less controllable readership. Reading all four as equivalent statements of a finished doctrine erases part of the practice.

The physical work also matters. Information has to be copied, dispatched, received, located again, and sometimes requested repeatedly. The scholarly community exists through postal routes, travelers, intermediaries, secretarial work, and institutions willing to preserve papers. It is extensive without being instantaneous.

Language is part of this organization. The French of the Paris proposal and the later philosophical works, the Latin of the calculus publication, and the German of the Wolfenbüttel memorandum address overlapping but different working worlds. His practice is multilingual at the level of composition, not simply international in its eventual reception. A change of language can accompany a change of addressee, genre, and purpose.[52, 53, 54]

In a letter to the Jesuit Joachim Bouvet of 18 May 1703, Leibniz acknowledges the difficulty of bringing his thoughts into order and the assistance, energy, and time the task would require. This is especially revealing beside the scale of the surviving archive. The organizer of knowledge is not exempt from the disorder that growing knowledge produces.[55]

One recurring imbalance becomes visible: every successful exchange can generate further obligations. A useful correspondent sends more material. A promising comparison opens another question. Maintaining the means of inquiry produces enough incoming work to compete with finishing the inquiry itself.

15. Sophie, Sophie Charlotte, and the people who ask back

Two of Leibniz's most consequential relationships are with Sophie, electress of Hanover, and her daughter Sophie Charlotte, who becomes queen in Prussia. Their correspondence and conversations belong to the making of his philosophy as well as to his life at court.

They are patrons, political actors, readers, and interlocutors whose questions help determine what he explains.[56]

The scale and variety of the surviving correspondence matter. Irena Backus' s review of Lloyd Strickland' s edition notes a much larger body of exchanges than the philosophical selection printed in that volume. Political and courtly matters occupy much of it. Restricting the relationship to passages that resemble a modern philosophy syllabus risks misidentifying how intellectual exchange actually worked.[57]

An exchange with Sophie in 1702 offers a concrete example. The discussion concerns Isaac Jaquelot' s arguments about the existence of God and whether they would persuade an atheist. Sophie is asking about the force of a proof upon someone who does not already share its premises. Leibniz has to respond to a reader testing the argument' s effectiveness, not merely admiring its ingenuity.[58]

Sophie Charlotte' s interest in Pierre Bayle helps generate the discussions out of which the Theodicy develops. The work' s eventual public form has a history in conversations with a woman whose institutional position gives those conversations continuity and consequence.[59]

This is not a reason to convert every patron into a hidden coauthor. It is a reason to specify what participation can mean. An interlocutor chooses the problem, refuses an easy explanation, asks for a written account, connects the author to another reader, or keeps an inquiry alive across years. These acts affect what gets written.

Caroline of Ansbach, later princess of Wales and queen, becomes another such intermediary. The famous exchange between Leibniz and Samuel Clarke in 1715–1716 begins with a communication to her and passes through her hands. A canonical confrontation between two male philosophers is also an exchange organized through a woman' s intellectual and dynastic relationships.[60]

The court is thus neither simply an obstruction nor merely a purse. It can be a place of sustained, demanding conversation. Its inequalities remain, but they do not make the people within it intellectually interchangeable.

16. Why a maker of machines refuses a merely mechanical world

Leibniz' s philosophy becomes harder to understand if we assume that practical involvement with machines must lead him to explain everything as machinery. His question is partly what a mechanical explanation can accomplish, and partly what it leaves unexplained.

In the Discourse on Metaphysics of 1686, he argues that the older language of substantial forms should not be dismissed simply because it has been misused. Invoking a form does

not explain the particular operation of a physical object. Saying that a clock has a time-telling quality is no substitute for explaining its mechanism. Physics should investigate particular phenomena through experiments and mechanical reasoning. Yet those explanations need not settle the more general question of what makes something a genuine substance.[61]

That distinction is central. Leibniz is not proposing that engineers interrupt their work whenever a metaphysical puzzle arises. He explicitly compares the independence of practical deliberation from ultimate questions of freedom and fate. Different inquiries can proceed with their own appropriate explanations, even when a wider account remains necessary.

His dynamics gives the disagreement with Cartesian mechanism a more technical form. In the Specimen dynamicum of 1695, he distinguishes different senses of force and disputes the adequacy of conserving a quantity measured simply by size of body and speed. The quantity he calls vis viva is proportional to mass multiplied by the square of speed. Although this belongs to the ancestry of the modern kinetic-energy formula, his distinctions and explanatory purposes should not be silently replaced with ours.[62]

The issue is how to measure a body’ s capacity to produce an effect, rather than merely describe its current motion. Arguments about falling and rising bodies make that difference assessable. For Leibniz, the inquiry strengthens the case that the nature of bodies cannot be exhausted by geometrical extension. A metaphysical commitment and a quantitative physical investigation support one another without becoming the same claim.[63, 64]

The problem of unity is one such wider question. A pile of things can be treated as one thing for convenience. But what makes an individual being more than an aggregate whose unity depends on our way of naming it? If matter is divisible into further parts, merely identifying smaller pieces does not automatically supply the unity being sought. His mature answer turns toward active, simple substances, eventually called monads.[65, 66]

A monad is not a minute physical ball. In the Monadology of 1714, simplicity means the absence of parts; it therefore excludes the spatial divisibility that ordinary material objects possess. A monad’ s changes arise from its own internal principle. Leibniz describes perception as the expression of multiplicity within such a unity, and appetition as the tendency carrying it from one perceptual state to another.[67]

The notorious image of monads without windows addresses causal explanation. Nothing literally enters a simple substance as a material part might enter a container. It does not mean that the most sociable of philosophers secretly recommends social isolation. Each monad expresses the same universe from its own situation, and the correspondence among them depends on the order established by God. The thesis is a metaphysical account of coordinated individuality, not a personal temperament dressed up as a cosmology.

The famous mill argument sharpens his resistance to an exhaustive mechanical explanation of perception. Imagine enlarging a supposed thinking machine while keeping its

proportions, until someone could walk inside. The visitor would encounter parts acting upon other parts. Leibniz argues that this inspection would still not disclose perception itself. The point is not that the mechanism is too small or insufficiently complicated; it is that spatial relations and movements do not, in his account, explain the unity of a perceptual experience.[68]

A contemporary reader need not accept that conclusion to recognize the precision of the problem. Nor should the passage be recruited as a ready-made verdict on today's artificial intelligence. What it does show is that Leibniz distinguishes an operation that can be mechanized from the metaphysical conditions of a being that perceives. His work on a calculating machine does not erase that distinction.

His natural world is correspondingly active and densely organized. The Monadology compares portions of matter to gardens and ponds containing further life, and distinguishes organisms from human-made machines by organization extending into their parts. Modern biology does not simply validate these claims. They belong to a specific account of living organization and infinite division. But they show why the language of dead matter pushed around from outside cannot capture his own conception of nature.[69]

The practical and philosophical lives meet here without becoming identical. Both concern organized activity, relations, and the limits of what an arrangement of parts explains. It would be too strong to say that the mines or the calculator caused the metaphysics. It is well supported to say that the philosopher arguing about mechanism knew mechanical explanation as a working practice rather than only as an abstract opponent.

17. Arnauld and the difficulty of making a system answerable

In 1686 Leibniz uses Landgrave Ernst of Hesse-Rheinfels as an intermediary to seek Antoine Arnauld's response to the propositions associated with the Discourse on Metaphysics. Arnauld does not greet the outline as a completed achievement. He is disturbed by what it seems to imply about necessity and freedom.[70]

The problem is substantial. Leibniz argues that an individual has a complete concept containing everything truly attributable to that individual. His example in the Discourse is Alexander: the concept of this person includes far more than the office of kingship. It includes the events of his life. God comprehends their connection fully, whereas human beings must investigate them through history.[71]

But if everything a person will do is already included, in what sense can the person act freely? Arnauld's objection forces Leibniz to distinguish certainty from absolute necessity. An event can be certain within the actual world's complete order without being something whose opposite involves a contradiction. Leibniz also distinguishes God's choice of a world from a compulsion that would make no alternative conceivable.[72, 73]

This is not a verbal trick that ends the disagreement on the reader’s behalf. The adequacy of the distinction remains a real philosophical question. Its importance for the profile is that Leibniz has to make the system answerable to an intelligent person who sees a threat where he sees a reconciliation.

The exchange shows another working method: send a compressed statement to someone capable of objecting, then clarify the proposition under pressure. A private shorthand can leave its author unaware of what another reader will infer. The recipient’s resistance becomes part of the work needed to make the account communicable.

This is one reason not to start and end with the Monadology. Its short numbered paragraphs can give the appearance of a finished structure descending from above. The correspondence restores the labor of persuasion, qualification, and response through which such formulations become possible.

18. Reading Locke with a pencil: a philosophy of acquired capacity

The New Essays on Human Understanding, substantially completed in 1704 and published only in 1765, follow Locke’s Essay through a dialogue between Philalethes and Theophilus. Leibniz’s preface is unusually candid about the advantage of this arrangement. Following a substantial existing work saves some of the effort of beginning from nothing and provides an occasion to bring his own ideas before readers.[74, 75]

This is intellectual dependence made explicit rather than hidden. Locke supplies a sequence of problems. Leibniz can agree, distinguish, criticize, and add. He also acknowledges the formal cost: following another author’s order restricts the freedom of the dialogue. A borrowed architecture makes the project practicable while shaping what can be said within it.

The disagreement over innate ideas is more interesting than a contest between someone who believes in learning and someone who does not. Leibniz compares the mind to marble whose veins favor a particular figure. The figure is not already present as a finished statue. Work is needed to discover and bring it out. Similarly, an innate disposition need not be an explicit proposition continuously available to consciousness.[76]

The comparison links capacity and formation. A mind contributes something to knowledge without therefore possessing all its knowledge in advance. Experience supplies occasions; attention and reasoning develop what would otherwise remain implicit. The distinction is particularly important for someone whose own competence grows so visibly through reading, conversation, and difficult problems.

The preface also develops the idea of perceptions too small, numerous, or familiar to be consciously distinguished. The sound of the sea involves innumerable lesser sounds that we do not separately notice. An accustomed background noise may cease to attract attention

without ceasing to affect us. Conscious reflection is therefore not an exhaustive inventory of mental activity.[77]

This makes Leibniz a subtle observer of the difference between what is happening in us and what we can report. It does not make him the possessor of every later theory of the unconscious. His own argument concerns continuity, perception, and the activity of substance; preserving that context makes the observation more substantial than another claim that he anticipated the future.

As a portrait of intellectual work, the New Essays offers something equally valuable. Thinking can proceed by inhabiting another person's questions closely enough to discover where one's own account diverges. Leibniz's appetite for synthesis does not mean that he always seeks a compromise. Sometimes patient proximity makes disagreement sharper.

19. The best possible world is an argument about action

The Theodicy, published in 1710, addresses the goodness of God, human freedom, and the existence of evil, with Bayle as a central interlocutor. Its background includes discussions with Sophie Charlotte about the challenges raised by Bayle's writings. This is a book produced within an active controversy about whether reason can make religious commitments coherent.[78]

Leibniz's claim that this is the best possible world concerns a whole order of mutually compatible things. It is not the assertion that every event is pleasant, every suffering deserved, or every existing institution beyond improvement. His argument requires a distinction between what appears preferable in isolation and what can belong to a coherent totality. That distinction bears an immense explanatory burden.[79]

The cost of the argument should not be softened. A person's suffering can appear to have been assigned a role in a harmony that the person cannot inspect. The claim to a best whole risks making every objection seem the product of inadequate perspective. It is reasonable to ask what would count against such an account, and what moral authority anyone acquires by asserting it.

But the connection between optimism and passivity is not Leibniz's own conclusion. In the Theodicy's preface he attacks the reasoning that, if an outcome is settled, deliberation and effort are unnecessary. People invoke fate selectively when the action required is troublesome. If a good result depends on taking the appropriate means, leaving out those means changes the situation.[80]

The earlier Discourse is even more useful for recovering the practical distinction. Acceptance of what has happened is not knowledge of what God wants us to do next. We cannot infer from the existence of an evil that we should preserve it. The obligation to pursue the good remains inside the world whose order Leibniz thinks God has chosen.[81]

His account of divine goodness also resists making justice a synonym for superior power. In

the Discourse, he rejects the idea that actions are good merely because God wills them. Otherwise praise would lose its intelligible content: the opposite act could have been declared equally good. His ethical writings similarly understand justice through wisdom and concern for others, rather than through the bare success of a command.[82, 83]

There is a tension between this account and the political bargains of his career. A philosophy that refuses to identify goodness with power can coexist with projects that seek power's support and tolerate its ambitions. The tension is more illuminating than either a wholesale acquittal or a dismissal of the philosophy as courtly flattery.

In the life, optimism functions partly as a warrant for effort: intelligibility and improvement are worth pursuing. Its danger is overconfidence about the eventual compatibility of goods whose immediate bearers may experience the bargain very differently.

20. Reunion: when better arguments cannot settle authority

Religious reconciliation is a sustained concern, but its different episodes should not be flattened into one uninterrupted campaign. Leibniz's Catholic writings of the mid-1680s, for example, have generated debate about their purpose. Strickland's recent study argues against automatically treating them all as documents of church reunion. The better-known negotiations involving figures such as Paul Pellisson and Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet develop in another setting, especially in the 1690s.[84]

The practical difficulty is institutional. It is possible to explain why two formulations need not conflict and still fail to secure agreement about who has authority to declare the explanation acceptable. The standing of councils, the claims of the papacy, the treatment of Protestants, and the conditions of a renewed settlement cannot be dissolved into a shared vocabulary alone. Proposals involving the status of the Council of Trent reveal how closely doctrinal discussion is tied to the procedures through which a church recognizes a binding decision.[85]

Leibniz's legal formation makes this a recognizable kind of problem. Agreement needs a form in which parties can enter it without first conceding everything under dispute. An argument that asks one side to surrender its institutional identity before negotiations begin is unlikely to produce reunion.

This is a substantial diplomatic intelligence. It is also subject to a persistent limitation. The ability to identify a possible accommodation does not create the will to accept it, and a mediator's conviction that differences can be reconciled does not confer authority on him to reconcile them.

The religious purpose is real. Leibniz is not merely using confessional language to conceal a secular program of tolerance. His preferred outcome belongs to a Christian account of truth and order. Approaching him as a contemporary means taking that commitment as

seriously as we take the projects with which we more readily sympathize.

21. China, binary arithmetic, and the unequal reach of curiosity

Leibniz's interest in China changes the geographic scale of his practice. He does not travel there. His access depends heavily on Jesuit missionaries, their reports and letters, European routes of transmission, and the institutional circumstances of the mission at the Qing court. Chinese knowledge reaches him through people already interpreting what they encounter.[86, 87]

In Novissima Sinica of 1697, expanded in 1699, he assembles reports and writes a preface imagining a consequential exchange between Europe and China. His striking proposal that Europe might need instruction in practical morality from China disrupts the assumption that learning must travel in only one direction. The admiration nevertheless remains embedded in a Christian framework and in information selected by missionary intermediaries.[88]

The exchange with Joachim Bouvet brings these possibilities and distortions into particularly close contact. Bouvet works in China and seeks traces of ancient religious truth in Chinese texts and symbols. Leibniz brings an independently developed interest in binary arithmetic. Their correspondence links mathematical structure, the Yijing diagrams, historical interpretation, and theology.[89]

The chronology prevents a familiar confusion. Leibniz's binary investigations are documented in 1679, before this exchange. In his letter of 15 February 1701 he explains binary arithmetic to Bouvet and connects the representation of numbers through one and zero to an analogy with divine creation. Bouvet's subsequent communication about the hexagrams provides a new interpretive connection, not the original invention of Leibniz's binary method.[90, 91]

The 1703 paper on binary arithmetic presents the numerical system and its association with the diagrams. A genuine structural correspondence becomes the basis for a much more ambitious claim about recovered ancient meaning. The first can be examined mathematically; the second requires historical evidence that the correspondence alone cannot supply.[92]

This distinction is crucial to understanding the quality of his curiosity. He can take another intellectual tradition seriously enough to look for something Europe lacks, while also fitting it into an account whose governing terms remain his own. Recognition and appropriation are not mutually exclusive events.

His wider interest in languages extends this problem across northern Eurasia. Michael C. Carhart's Leibniz Discovers Asia follows the use of correspondence and linguistic evidence to investigate the histories and relations of peoples. The distinction from a

universal invented language is important: here the differences among actual languages are evidence to collect and compare.[93]

The world made accessible by these exchanges is neither frictionless nor politically innocent. Missions and expanding states open routes and select informants. Travelers decide what to record. An answer arrives in a form shaped by several intermediaries. Leibniz’s reach is impressive precisely because it is made through such arrangements; its limitations come from the same source.

The result is a cosmopolitanism worth examining without either celebrating it as already ours or dismissing it as nothing but domination. He makes some boundaries more permeable. He does not stand outside the hierarchies through which the crossing occurs.

22. Berlin: the academy needs a revenue stream

The society of sciences established in Berlin in 1700, with Leibniz as its first president, is one of the cases in which institutional imagination becomes an actual organization. Sophie Charlotte’s support and the patronage of Elector Friedrich III, later King Friedrich I in Prussia, are central conditions. The foundation is a political and administrative accomplishment as well as an intellectual one.[94]

Its financing is especially revealing. A privilege of 10 May 1700 gives the society exclusive rights to produce calendars in Brandenburg. These are widely used publications containing practical information organized around the year. The academy can attach scientific work to an existing and recurrent demand.[95]

Johann Jacob Chuno helps organize production and distribution; Gottfried Kirch contributes astronomical and calendar-making expertise. For the 1701 calendars, the academy’s historical account records 111,000 copies printed and 70,336 sold, with receipts of 6,348 thalers and a separately reported return of 2,192. The difference between print run, sales, and money retained matters. An institution cannot spend the prestige of its circulation figure.[96]

This is a concrete version of the problem already posed in the Paris spectacle memorandum. How can an activity that people will pay for sustain inquiry whose benefits may be dispersed or delayed? In Berlin the answer rests on a protected publishing market. Intellectual autonomy depends in part on a legally enforced advantage.

The privilege also displaces existing suppliers. To describe the arrangement only as an ingenious solution to research funding would omit the people whose access to the market is reduced. What looks like institutional invention from inside the academy is a redistribution of opportunity outside it.[97]

Nor does the charter instantly create a fully functioning organization. The academy’s historical account records a slow development of regular activity and publication, with Miscellanea Berolinensia appearing in 1710 and a formal inaugural gathering in 1711.

Founding, financing, staffing, meeting, and publishing are separate thresholds.[98]

Leibniz also pursues academy projects elsewhere, including proposals associated with Peter I. Their later realization should not be backdated into his lifetime: the Russian Academy is founded in 1724, after his death.[99]

His institutional achievement is therefore neither "he founded everything he imagined" nor "his plans were only dreams." He helps make one important organization possible, while other projects remain conditional. That mixture is the normal texture of a life spent trying to move between knowledge and power.

23. The Newton dispute: the correspondence becomes evidence against him

The calculus priority controversy turns the conditions of Leibniz's intellectual life into a source of danger. Newton develops his methods earlier in private; Leibniz develops his calculus independently and publishes his differential method in 1684. Letters, manuscripts seen or unseen, dates of access, and the distinction between possessing a method and announcing it become the material of a struggle over credit.[100, 101]

The Royal Society's investigation culminates in the Commercium epistolicum of 1712. Its report is an institutional document, but the institution is not positioned outside the dispute: Newton is its president. His substantial involvement in shaping the case and the later anonymous account of the publication make the resulting authority inseparable from advocacy.[102, 103]

The primary documents need to be read in that light. Newton's statements are evidence of how he constructs the case, not neutral verdicts to be copied into a biography. Leibniz and his allies likewise defend positions, select evidence, and contest the opposing narrative. The force of the controversy cannot be understood by assigning all self-interest to one side.[104]

The episode is especially painful in the context of Leibniz's practice. Correspondence works because material can circulate before final publication. But once credit is contested, that same circulation permits insinuation. Having received a letter, met an intermediary, or examined a manuscript becomes something from which an opponent can build a story of dependence.

The conceptual distinctions are straightforward even when the evidence is difficult. Earlier discovery, independent discovery, first publication, superior notation, and wider adoption are different claims. A person can prevail on one without prevailing on all. The dispute becomes destructive partly because these distinctions are made to carry the weight of personal honor and institutional prestige.

This is not an external scandal interrupting a purely intellectual history. It exposes the

vulnerability of the system through which the intellectual work has been made possible. The learned republic has patrons, gatekeepers, factions, and reputational enforcement. Its generosity is real; so is its capacity to turn an exchange into a prosecution.

24. The last years: still corresponding, still required to finish

When Georg Ludwig becomes George I of Great Britain in 1714, Leibniz does not accompany the court to London. The unfinished dynastic history remains an obligation. The mobility through which he has built his career is increasingly subject to an employer's demand for completion.[105, 106]

But this is not the disappearance of an abandoned thinker into total silence. The exchange with Clarke in 1715–1716 is vigorous and technically consequential. Leibniz contests absolute space and time, the relation between divine choice and sufficient reason, and aspects of the Newtonian picture of God's relation to the world. Theology and natural philosophy remain entangled in the argument.[107]

A letter to Nicolas Remond in January 1716 provides a more ordinary and perhaps more revealing piece of evidence. Leibniz wants the unfinished work of the chemist Wilhelm Homberg made available, including experiments and conjectures. The interest is characteristic: the death of an investigator should not make his potentially useful work disappear. The question is how another person's unfinished inquiry can still enter circulation.[108]

Leibniz dies in Hanover on 14 November 1716. His papers are secured on the ruler's orders. The political sensitivity of the estate helps explain the preservation of an exceptionally large body of material. The archive is not simply the spontaneous gift of a disembodied mind to posterity; it also survives through the institutions whose service produced so much of it.[109]

The incomplete works then acquire different afterlives. Protogaea appears in full in 1749; the New Essays in 1765. The Academy edition, distributed across several series and editorial centres, continues to reveal a thinker whose published books never represented the full range of his working activity.[110, 111, 112]

The estate changes the scale at which we can know him. It also creates a danger: because so many fragments survive, almost any later concern can find an apparently prophetic sentence. The better use of the archive is to restore what a particular note was trying to do, for whom, and under which constraints.

25. A vocation made of attempted conjunctions

Leibniz's life does not become intelligible merely by multiplying the fields in which he worked. "Philosopher, mathematician, jurist, librarian, engineer, historian, diplomat" names the jurisdictions but leaves the movement between them unexplained.

The stronger continuity is a repeated attempt to connect things whose separation prevents something valuable from happening. A notation connects a problem to a repeatable operation. A letter connects a distant investigator to a local question. An index connects a collection to a reader's need. A privilege connects recurring revenue to sustained research. A metaphysical argument connects individuality, activity, freedom, and order without conceding that one must simply cancel the others.

These conjunctions are not equally successful. Some depend on demonstrable relations; others depend on agreements that do not arrive. Some expand another person's capacity; others place that person inside a project whose benefits and authority are unevenly distributed. The practice needs to be judged at the level of the particular arrangement, not acquitted in advance by the nobility of universal knowledge.

There is also a limit internal to his ambition. The pursuit of connections generates new dependencies. Before completing the history, more documents are needed. Before presenting the philosophy, further objections need answering. Before making the institution durable, revenue and patrons must be secured. The whole becomes a reason to work and a reason why the work cannot yet be finished.

The most compelling Leibniz is therefore neither a modern profession transplanted into a wig nor an impossible standard of universal mastery. He is a highly situated person with an extraordinary appetite for making one field answer to another, and an equally consequential dependence on other people's knowledge, patience, labor, and power.

Return to Paris in 1675. The spectacle exists as a memorandum. The calculus is emerging in papers that have not yet become a public method. Continued residence is uncertain. The future does not yet explain the activity. What exists is the work of a person trying to give several possibilities enough form that somebody else might help make them real.

Sources and further reading

The notes distinguish primary texts from modern interpretations, collection descriptions, and publication records. References to an abstract, catalogue, or publisher's description support the specific information available there; they do not imply consultation of the whole work. French and German primary texts are paraphrased directly where linked. Jonathan Bennett's accessible versions are modernized presentations and should be compared with scholarly editions for close philosophical work.

For continued reading, Borowski is the most direct route into the uncertain formation of the Paris years. Maria Rosa Antognazza's Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography (Cambridge University Press, 2009) supplies a larger lifetime reconstruction; Gregory Brown's review discusses both its achievement and the risks of an overly unified retrospective account. Hofmann provides the specialist mathematical Paris; Wakefield restores the mining administration's perspective; Strickland's edition of the two Sophies opens a different intellectual geography of the courts. The documents on the spectacle, the library, and the

exchange with Bouvet are especially productive companions to the familiar philosophical works.

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6. Leibniz University Hannover, “The Life and Work of Leibniz”. Institutional timeline of residences, employers, and appointments. Johann Friedrich’s death in 1679 is distinguished from the following phase of service.↩

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