

Contributi/9

Gadamer as a Leibnizian Philosopher

Hermeneutics, Synthesis, and the Fusion of Horizons

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In this paper, I compare Leibniz with the twentieth-century German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and make a case for reading Gadamer as representing a model of a contemporary, post-Idealist, Leibnizian philosopher. By drawing attention to remarks made by Gadamer indicating an affinity between his philosophical hermeneutics and Leibniz's project of a global philosophical synthesis, I argue that they share an understanding of the truth as distributed between multiple divergent viewpoints. Correspondingly, both develop approaches to philosophy that require engaging in constructive dialogue with others. However, where Gadamer saw Leibniz's philosophy as aiming to produce a synthesis of finite perspectives converging in a central point of view, Gadamer himself understood philosophy as consisting in an ongoing and open-ended fusion of finite human horizons. By thus eliminating any central organizing perspective, Gadamer's approach realizes the conciliatory and synthetic spirit of Leibniz's philosophy in the absence of an infinite mind or perspective.

In a television appearance in 1996, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) observed the following regarding Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz:

I would say there is really no more hermeneutic exemplar in the history of philosophy that I know of than Leibniz, who himself maintained the inherent connection and reciprocal interrelatedness of alternating viewpoints and alternating perspectives ultimately for the structure of truth itself¹.

Coming from Gadamer, such a statement represents a clear acknowledgement of intellectual kinship between himself and the philosopher

¹ Quoted in J. Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, tr. by J. Weinsheimer, New Haven 2003, p. 250

of Hannover. Gadamer himself is best known for having developed a form of philosophical hermeneutics – most prominently in his 1960 magnum opus *Truth and Method* [*Wahrheit und Methode*] – according to which all facets of human experience involve acts of interpretation, not just those that directly engage literary or philosophical texts or works of art. Indeed, in characterizing Leibniz who exemplifies the hermeneutic attitude, or the «ability to listen to the other in the belief that he could be right²», and according to whom truth involves «the inherent connection and reciprocal interrelatedness of alternating viewpoints and alternating perspectives³», Gadamer could be describing his own philosophical hermeneutics.

That Gadamer evidently felt such an affinity for Leibniz may come as a surprise to his readers. Gadamer frequently developed his philosophical argumentation by means of detailed interpretation of the texts of historical figures including Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Dilthey. Indeed, Gadamer's own philosophical views emerge dialectically as a result of his engagement with the problems handed down by the broad European philosophical tradition. However, while Gadamer did comment on Leibniz and his legacy on several occasions, notably during an address he gave at in 1946 at the University of Leipzig in order to commemorate the three-hundredth anniversary of Leibniz's birth⁴, Leibniz does not figure prominently in his writings, including *Truth and Method*. It is thus notable that near the end of his career he identifies Leibniz as being – to his knowledge – the most clear exemplar of a hermeneutical attitude in the history of philosophy⁵.

In this paper, I focus on Gadamer's claim that Leibniz exemplifies a form of philosophical hermeneutics as a starting point to develop a philosophical comparison between Gadamer and Leibniz. I argue that we can see them as sharing a conception of truth as distributed across a multiplicity of different viewpoints, and that this lead both of them to emphasize the relevance that the history of philosophy has for philosophical thought. For Leibniz, no single

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ H-G. Gadamer, *Zum 300. Geburtstag von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, in *H-G. Gadamer: Gesammelte Werke Band 10: Hermeneutik im Rückblick*, Tübingen 1995, pp. 295-307. In this address given in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Gadamer examines Leibniz's legacy within the wider history of German philosophy. He places particular emphasis on how the Leibnizian preestablished harmony and monadology functioned as solutions to the Cartesian mind-body problem, and suggests that Leibniz anticipates several intellectual currents prominent in subsequent German Philosophy and Idealism including the connections between force and life, rationalism, and a romantic vision of the unconscious.

⁵ One reader who has noted the significance of Leibniz for Gadamer and explored the possible significance of Leibniz's metaphysics for contemporary Gadamerian hermeneutics is Gadamer's biographer Jean Grondin. See J. Grondin, *The Possible Legacy of Leibniz's Metaphysics in Hermeneutics*, in *Leibniz and Hermeneutics*, ed. by J. A. Nicolás, J. M. Gómez Delgado, and M. Escribano Cabeza, Newcastle upon Tyne, pp. 3-15. Grondin's approach asks how incorporating elements of Leibniz's metaphysics might add to or supplement Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. In this regard, it differs from the approach taken here, which is interested in the degree to which Gadamer instantiated a Leibnizian way of doing philosophy.

philosophical school or tradition has exclusive access to the truth, and the truth is in fact distributed everywhere; for Gadamer, truth and meaning emerge as a result of a process of the 'fusion of horizons' arising from conversations bridging different historical eras and cultures. As I will show, both philosophers exhibit a concern for listening to and interpreting others by actively seeking out perspectives differing from their own. Despite their overlap on these points, however, I further show that Gadamer saw Leibniz's own approach to philosophy as resulting in a total synthesis of philosophical perspectives that is ill-suited to what he considered the fundamental finitude of the human condition.

In developing this comparison between Leibniz and Gadamer, my goal is not to address the question of Leibniz's concrete influence on Gadamer, or indeed upon post-Idealist philosophy in general. Rather, by highlighting Gadamer's interpretation of Leibniz as an exemplar of a specifically hermeneutical approach to philosophy, my goal is to ask the question of what it might look like to carry out a Leibnizian approach to philosophy in a contemporary setting. Specifically, my goal is to suggest that Gadamer can provide us with a potential model for a post-Idealist Leibnizian philosophical practice, one that does not seek to ground all of reality and philosophical truth in an all-encompassing God's-eye perspective.

In what follows, I first outline Leibniz's synthetic approach to philosophy, according to which he sought to bring together the best from multiple different philosophical schools and traditions. I then argue that it conforms to the content and structure of Leibniz's metaphysics: insofar as God creates each existing substance with its own unique perspective on the world, each substance has its own legitimate contribution to make. I then turn to Gadamer, explaining his attitude towards the type of grand philosophical synthesis he saw Leibniz as having carried out. I then explain his own account of interpretation and philosophical reconciliation, which I argue involves an essentially open-ended process involving self-criticism and the fusion of finite perspectives. In conclusion, I explore the question of what it might mean to philosophize in the spirit of Leibniz today by suggesting that in Gadamer we can find a model of a type of post-Idealist Leibnizian philosophical practice.

1. Leibniz's Conciliatory and Synthetic Philosophy

Leibniz explicitly sought to reconcile and synthesize the views of competing intellectual groups, thereby bringing together the best from multiple different viewpoints. In his view, philosophical discussion ought not be antagonistic or carried out with a view towards defeating or refuting a rival. Such an approach assumes that the truth can be the exclusive possession of one particular philosophical school or tradition, thus closing oneself off to the good that may be found in the ideas of others. Insofar as philosophical insight is distributed across times and places, and we should therefore value and be charitable towards

the ideas of those from outside our own traditions. Thus, as Leibniz wrote to Pierre Coste in 1706: «I have this general maxim to condemn nothing and to profit from that which is good everywhere⁶».

There are a number of ways that we can see Leibniz attempting to synthesize divergent points of view. For instance, instead of following moderns such as Descartes in completely rejecting traditional notions of substance and final causation, Leibniz sought to reconcile the insights of both modern and ancient philosophy. Thus, in texts such as the *Discourse on Metaphysics* of 1686, we see Leibniz going to great lengths to justify rehabilitating the use of substantial forms and final causes in light of their rejection by the ‘modern’ philosophers. While acknowledging the explanatory power of modern physics, Leibniz claims that since «the nature of body does not consist merely in extension, that is, in size, shape, and motion», it is the case that «we must necessarily recognize in body something related to souls, something we commonly call substantial form⁷». Thus, although he may be accused of «advancing a great paradox by attempting to rehabilitate the old philosophy in some fashion and to restore the almost banished substantial forms to their former place⁸». reviving a notion of substantial form is, for Leibniz, necessary in order to provide an adequate metaphysical account of reality.

To move to the level of Leibniz’s philosophy as a whole, consider the way that he describes his own philosophy in the preface to the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, a dialogue in which Leibniz contrasts his own views with those of Locke. As he writes through his mouthpiece Theophilus:

This system appears to unite Plato with Democritus, Aristotle with Descartes, the Scholastics with the moderns, theology and morality with reason. Apparently it takes the best from all systems and then advances further than anyone has yet done [...] I now see what Plato had in mind when he took matter to be an imperfect and transitory being; what Aristotle meant by his ‘entelechy’; in what sense even Democritus could promise another life, as Pliny says he did; how far the skeptics were right in decrying the senses; why Descartes thinks that animals are automata, and why they nevertheless have souls and sense, just as mankind thinks they do⁹.

To condemn nothing and to profit from everything that is good thus means that in approaching a philosophical text or claim, from the history of philosophy or otherwise, one ought to adopt an open-minded and charitable attitude that seeks to find what is useful in the words of another. The task is to then take up that which is good and to integrate it with one’s own perspective.

⁶ G. W. Leibniz, *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, edited by C. J. Gerhardt, Berlin 1875, Volume III, p. 384.

⁷ G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, translated by R. Ariew and D. Garber, Indianapolis 1989, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹ G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, edited by P. Remnant, and J. Bennett, Cambridge 1996, pp. 71-72.

Leibniz's interest in philosophical synthesis extended, for instance, to the Chinese intellectual traditions, which he learned about through the mediation of Jesuit missionaries¹⁰. As Leibniz saw it, the Chinese possessed natural philosophy and theology which he saw as expressing the same basic truths as that of the Christian Europe. He also thought that the Chinese were further advanced in practical philosophy than the Europeans, arguing that:

But it is desirable that they in turn teach us those things which are especially in our interest: the greatest use of practical philosophy and a more perfect manner of living [...] Certainly the conditions of our affairs, slipping as we are into ever greater corruption, seems to be such that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology¹¹.

Whatever the accuracy of Leibniz's claims regarding Chinese thought, this example shows that he is in principle willing to actively engage with and learn from the thought of other cultures¹².

The project of synthesizing insights from multiple sources requires active effort on the part of the interpreter. Indeed, Leibniz holds that ideas are often found in a confused and unclear state. Thus, by engaging in dialogue with others, including those from foreign times and places, Leibniz thinks of himself as helping to reveal or bring to light what has been obscured. Thus, he writes:

The truth is more distributed than one thinks. But it is often masked and also quite often complicated and even weakened, mutilated, and corrupted by additions that damage it and make it less useful. By disclosing the traces of truth in the ancients or (more generally speaking) in previous [authors], one would thereby be extracting gold from mud, the diamond from its mine, and light from the shadows – and this would indeed amount to a certain perennial philosophy¹³.

For Leibniz, looking for what is good in what others say involves clarifying what might be confused or reconstructing what might be fragmentary. In doing so, we must not begin with the intention to reject a text or to highlight its flaws. If we start from a dialogical outlook or condemnation or opposition, then we will fail to recognize the reason in what others say, and hence miss the truths embedded within what they have to say. Thus, no matter how confused the ideas of others appear, one should listen to what they propose and actively search for what is good within it an approach that allows us to work together constructively.

¹⁰ For more on Leibniz's general interest in, and access to, ideas from China, see F. Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light*, Cambridge 2004.

¹¹ G. W. Leibniz, *Writings on China*, translated by D. J. Cook and H. Rosemont, Chicago and La Salle 1994, II, pp. 50-51.

¹² Leibniz was not always as charitable to other cultures as he was to the Chinese. For instance, for an account of his views regarding Islam throughout his career, see I. Almond, *Leibniz, Historicism, and the 'Plague of Islam,'* «Eighteenth-Century Studies», 39/4, 2006, pp. 463-483.

¹³ G. W. Leibniz, *The Art of Controversies*, ed. by M. Dascal, Q. Racionero, A. Cardoso, Dordrecht 2006, p. 446.

At the same time, attempting to identify the good in what others have to say does not mean that one cannot ultimately criticize their views. To the degree that criticism comes into play, however, it takes aim at those positions and attitudes taken by other philosophers that do not manifest intellectual honesty or good-will. Importantly these instances range across failures at both theoretical and practical levels. At a theoretical level, Leibniz will reject ideas for logical inconsistency. An example is his critique of the notion of indivisible physical atoms proposed by atomists such as Epicurus or Democritus held that the basic building blocks of reality are indivisible physical units – atoms – which combine together to produce larger aggregates. For Leibniz, who maintains that matter is essentially and infinitely divisible, the concept of a physical atom is self-contradictory: since matter can be divided endlessly, one can never find a level of indivisible material units. Nevertheless, Leibniz thinks that there is some truth to the atomists' vision. Despite rejecting the existence of standard material atoms, Leibniz agrees with the atomists' argument that in order to have composite entities such as tables and chairs, there must be real unities – something atom-like – at their basis. Thus, in the *Monadology*, he not only argues that there must be simple substances – monads – since there are composite, but that because monads lack extension and are indivisible, they «are the true atoms of nature and, in brief, the elements of things¹⁴».

At a practical level, Leibniz rejects an overly audacious or innovative spirit. By contrast with the types of moderation and universal approval that he recommends, those who are guilty of an intellectual audaciousness are too quick to reject the views of others. It can also lead to a type of sectarian impulse that thinks that one can possess the truth in an exclusive fashion. As Mogens Lærke writes, for Leibniz, «audacity is in effect a vice of youth, a sign of immaturity, and it disposes one to precipitous judgment and to a disdain for true erudition. It spreads as a result of an excessive freedom to philosophize¹⁵». By indulging in such philosophical audacity, one too easily focuses on the bad in what others say, and one thereby looks to tear others down instead of building together alongside them. By contrast, in the *Specimen Dynamicum*, Leibniz writes that that his own reconciliation of ancient and modern philosophy via the rehabilitation of substantial forms:

prevents us from appearing more eager to destroy than to build, and [...] prevents the arrogance of bold minds from throwing us, daily, in our uncertainty, into perpetually changing our views [...] for if you just omit the harsher things they say against others, there is usually much that is good and true in the writings of the distinguished ancients and moderns¹⁶.

¹⁴ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 213.

¹⁵ M. Lærke, *Les Lumières de Leibniz: Controverses Avec Huet, Bayle, Regis, et More*, Paris 2015, p. 95 (my translation).

¹⁶ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 119.

For Leibniz, the ethical failure exhibited by excessively innovative and audacious philosophy results in a fundamental misunderstanding of others and a failure to find the truth in what they have to say.

Rhetorically speaking, Leibniz claims to be careful to speak to the specific concerns of the relevant audience. As he writes in 1678 to Hermann Conring:

I am concerned, as are all who wish to hold a middle ground, not to seem too much inclined toward either of the two opposed adversaries. Whenever I discuss matters with the Cartesians, certainly, I extol Aristotle where he deserves it and undertake a defense of the ancient philosophy, because I see that many Cartesians read their one master only, ignoring what is held in high esteem by others, and thus unwisely impose limits on their own ability. I do not at all approve of throwing words around too freely against the old philosophy, nor do I approve of the argument which a certain friend in this neighborhood has divulged; I have told him so in a letter, I think that the two philosophies should be combined and that where the old leaves off, the new should begin¹⁷.

In this connection, Christia Mercer has written of Leibniz's 'rhetoric of attraction,' according to which Leibniz actively employs discursive means that aim to draw interlocutors in and lead them to consider the virtues of alternative philosophical positions¹⁸.

One of Leibniz's central philosophical concerns was to bring together and harmonize multiple different theoretical viewpoints. As we have seen, he applies this approach to the ideas of different historical eras and cultures, and he deploys practical maxims and rhetorical strategies in order to further his project. The end result, as he puts it in his 1698 *Explanation [Eclaircissement] of the Difficulties which M. Bayle Found with the New System of the Union of the Soul and Body*, is a system in which

The Sceptics' lack of substantial reality in sensible things; the Pythagoreans' and Platonists' reduction of everything to harmonies and numbers, ideas and perceptions; the one and the whole of Parmenides and Plotinus (though not of Spinoza); the Stoic connectedness, compatible with the spontaneity maintained by others; the vitalistic philosophy of the Cabbalists and the Hermetics, who attributed feeling to everything; the forms and entelechies of Aristotle and the scholastics; and meanwhile also the mechanical explanations, by Democritus and the moderns, of all particular phenomena, and so on--all these are reunited as in a common centre of perspective from which the object (confused when looked at from anywhere else) reveals its regularity and the congruence of its parts. Our biggest fault has been sectarianism, limiting ourselves by the rejection of others¹⁹.

It is important to note that in this formulation, Leibniz does suggest that the synthesis of these different philosophical views itself represents a particular

¹⁷ G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz's Philosophical Papers and Letters*, edited by L. E. Loemker, 2nd edition, Dordrecht 1976, p. 190.

¹⁸ C. Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origin and Development*, Cambridge 2000, p. 57.

¹⁹ G. W. Leibniz, *Leibniz's "New System" and Associated Contemporary Texts*, edited by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks, Oxford 1997, p. 85.

standpoint, namely a central point from which one can see the harmony amongst the different elements. In the next section, I will argue that the philosophical sentiment expressed in this maxim «to condemn nothing and to profit from that which is good everywhere²⁰» is grounded in the nature of Leibniz's metaphysics.

2. Motivations for Synthesis

Commentators have supplied several potential explanations for Leibniz's synthetic approach to philosophy. From a biographical point of view, Maria Rosa Antognazza has argued that we can understand Leibniz's approach as stemming both from his early exposure to the Ramist pedagogical traditions as well as the autodidactic form of his early exploration of his late father's library, to which he was granted access at the age of eight:

An 'autodidact' in the limited sense that his main intellectual adventures were private, informal, and self-generated, the young Leibniz was accustomed to reading what he wanted and putting the pieces together for himself [...] Loyal to his Lutheran roots, he was unafraid to seek inspiration in pagan writers or medieval, Catholic, or Reformed traditions or to reconcile the traditions in which he had been raised with those he had encountered on his own²¹.

Following Antognazza, we might see Leibniz's anti-sectarianism as stemming, at least in part, from the fact that his earliest intellectual engagements were self-guided.

Mercer identifies this aspect of Leibniz's philosophy 'conciliatory eclecticism' and argues that it aimed to institute a form of intellectual peace:

That Leibniz intended his metaphysics to constitute the foundations for philosophical, theological, and political peace seems odd from our twenty-first-century perspective, but Leibniz was entirely sincere in his conciliatory effort [...] Leibniz's goal was to bring about intellectual peace by constructing a true metaphysics built out of the materials of the noblest philosophical traditions. His elaborate attempt to combine doctrines from philosophers as diverse as Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes while solving the great theological and philosophical problems constitutes an unnoticed aspect of his brilliance²².

For Mercer, Leibniz's desire for peace was forged as a result of witnessing the ongoing seventeenth-century strife between different nations, religious sects, and philosophical schools of thought.

Bound up with these biographical considerations, however, are metaphysical reasons why Leibniz is concerned with philosophical synthesis and reconciliation.

²⁰ Leibniz *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, III, p. 384.

²¹ M. R. Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge 2011, p. 54.

²² Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, p. 2.

Indeed, the very content of Leibniz's metaphysical claims entails a distribution of the truth amongst distinct points of view, and hence, a rejection of narrow sectarianism. To take the mature period metaphysics, as outlined in well-known texts such as the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, for instance, all substances are created by God such that they occupy their own individual point of view within the world. From this point of view, each substance expresses a unique perspective upon the things, and thus possesses its own unique slice of the truth.

Moreover, every substance is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or of the whole universe, which each one expresses in its own way, somewhat as the same city is variously represented depending upon the different positions from which it is viewed. Thus the universe is in some way multiplied as many times as there are substances, and the glory of God is likewise multiplied by as many entirely different representations of his work [...] For it expresses, however confusedly, everything that happens in the universe, whether past, present, or future – this has some resemblance to an infinite perception or knowledge²³.

One important consequence of this metaphysical vision is that while each of us expresses the entirety of the world, this expression is nevertheless limited to our particular vantage point. The other vantage points occupied by others are, nevertheless, guaranteed to have a different, but true, perspective on the world. Thus, no one substance can never attain a full or exclusive understanding of the truth. While our thinking may be guided by fundamental principles such as the principle of reason or non-contradiction, no finite substance can know the world in its full detail and without confusion. While God does in fact occupy a central or unified perspective from which he can adequately survey the whole, we need to engage and interpret other viewpoints in order to create links and syntheses that can give us a clearer picture of the truth.

Franklin Perkins emphasizes this aspect of Leibniz's metaphysics in his account of Leibniz's interest in the Chinese intellectual traditions. Perkins argues that Leibniz's metaphysics, as opposed to those of rough philosophical contemporaries such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke, entails a philosophical practice whereby one engages with the ideas and beliefs of cultures other than one's own. Thus, for Perkins, the sense of intellectual kinship Leibniz thought existed between Europe and China, as well as his dream of the institution of a 'commerce of light' between these two poles of human civilization, wherein each would benefit from what is best in the other, follows very directly from Leibniz's metaphysics:

One universe is multiplied infinitely by its expression in diverse monads, and a simple monad is given an infinitely diverse content. The experience of every person is grounded in a shared universe and shared rationality, yet each is limited, forming a unique perspective. We learn by reflection on our own perspective, but we can

²³ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 42.

also learn from the perspectives of others, and, in practice, we *must* learn from these perspectives²⁴.

Thus, it is Leibniz's substantive metaphysical commitments, and in particular to the view that each finite substance occupies a distinct, limited, yet true perspective on reality, that supply reasons for supporting intellectual exchange and dialogue with cultures outside of our own²⁵.

As we have seen, Leibniz's philosophical synthesis aims to encompass the best ideas from both ancient and modern European philosophy, and additionally calls for dialogue with the Chinese intellectual tradition. For Leibniz, the validity of this project is underwritten, by an understanding of the world as created by God, where each substance occupies its own unique perspective. Given such a metaphysical scheme, each viewpoint does indeed have its contribution to make to the truth, and, to return to Gadamer's own formulation of this idea in Leibniz, the truth emerges from «the inherent connection and reciprocal interrelatedness of alternating viewpoints and alternating perspectives²⁶». From this standpoint, the goal of philosophy is to unify and assimilate the contributions of as many viewpoints as possible. In doing so, we can approach something like God's central perspective on the world.

3. Gadamer and Leibniz's Philosophical Synthesis

We have seen that Gadamer considered Leibniz's views on truth and the need to incorporate multiple perspectives into a philosophical account of the world to exemplify a hermeneutic attitude. In this section, I outline the relationship that he saw between his own philosophical hermeneutics and Leibniz's philosophical synthesis. I argue that while Leibniz may represent for Gadamer a 'hermeneutic exemplar' in the history of philosophy, he did not think we should simply attempt to follow in Leibniz's footsteps today. Instead of aiming to produce a single grand synthesis in which each separate contribution could be identified from a centralized perspective, Gadamer himself opted for an open-ended form of philosophical dialogue. Gadamer's own approach thus aims to support a continual process of interpretation – both in terms of the consideration of new voices as well as in terms of the reinterpretation of one's own views.

In the course of describing his decision to write *Truth and Method* in an autobiographical essay composed in 1977, Gadamer makes revealing comments on the relationship between Leibniz and his own hermeneutical philosophical project. He first claims that in writing the book, he had wanted to capture the relevance that historical figures might have for present day philosophy by asking

²⁴ Perkins, *Leibniz and China*, p. 44.

²⁵ See also Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, p. 9.

²⁶ Quoted in Grondin, *Hans-Georg Gadamer: A Biography*, p. 250

«how the various paths of philosophizing which I retraced in my teaching could be made genuinely relevant for today by starting from the current philosophical situation²⁷». In relating the present activity of philosophy to philosophical history, however, he indicates that he wanted to avoid both a Hegelian approach which would «arrange [philosophical ideas] into a historical process that is constructed in an a priori way» as well as «the relativistic neutrality of historicism²⁸». While the former grants too great a continuity to the unfolding of history, the latter renders historical understanding impossible by severing the connection between different historical periods altogether.

The approach that Gadamer himself adopted took a middle path between these two poles of Hegelian continuity and historicist discontinuity. Significantly, Gadamer indicates that while his own approach shares with Leibniz the attitude of agreement with the perspectives of others, it did not aim for the same type of overarching synthesis of philosophical views:

I agree with Leibniz, who once said that he himself approved of nearly all he read. But in contrast with that great thinker, the stimulus of this experience did not lead me to feel I must create one great synthesis, as he did. Indeed, I began asking myself whether philosophy could still be placed under the rubric of such a synthetic task at all²⁹.

For Gadamer then, the attempt to understand past philosophers and philosophical ideas ought not result in an overall synthesis, not even one that could make room for each and every philosophical viewpoint. Rather,

must not philosophy hold itself radically open, captivated by what remains always evident to it, and use its powers to oppose all redarkening of what it has seen? Philosophy is enlightenment, but precisely also enlightenment with regard to its own dogmatism³⁰.

Note that the openness of which Gadamer speaks here refers precisely to the knowledge that philosophy already possesses. One potential danger for philosophy is a slide into a dogmatic commitment to what it already knows, and the remedy here proposed is to maintain an open mind with respect to one's own knowledge. While such an open mind may result in continued captivation by particular ideas, it may also entail a rethinking of them, or, alternatively, a recognition that their time is past and we should give them up. The contrast Gadamer intends to draw between himself and Leibniz is evident; while they both share an appreciation for past learning and an interest in extracting what is good from it, Gadamer does not think that this process can happen once and

²⁷ H-G. Gadamer, *Autobiographical Reflections*, in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings*, edited by R. E. Palmer, Evanston, Illinois, 2007, pp. 3-38: 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

for all, as if those ideas that have been redeemed can remain fixed in their place for all time.

Insofar as Gadamer maintains that philosophy must adopt a form of self-critical openness towards its own knowledge, it ought not merely repeat the type of synthesis enacted by Leibniz in the seventeenth-century. In this way, the interpretive approach that Gadamer adopts in his own philosophical hermeneutics does not aim to construct a perspective in which all disparate points of view could be unified at once. In the next section, I will outline Gadamer's account of philosophical understanding in *Truth and Method* in order to better articulate his critical divergence with Leibniz. Specifically, I will show that in engaging with different points of view, Gadamer does not think that we merely seek to broaden or multiply one's perspective on the truth; rather, we find avenues for self-overcoming in coming to learn from and agree with others. Thus, he proposed adopting a hermeneutical attitude in order to both preserve the past and tradition while leaving ourselves open to changing our minds, as well as future encounters and discoveries.

4. Finitude and the Fusion of Horizons

One of Gadamer's main goals in *Truth and Method* is to show that the forms of truth and meaning proper to the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] human history and experience cannot be obtained using the methods of the natural sciences [*Naturwissenschaften*]. Thus, for Gadamer, the realms of human history, art, literature, and experience more generally require different forms of understanding than the empirical methods of the natural sciences. Whereas the latter place emphasis on objective forms of knowledge, the former call for hermeneutical acts of interpretation. Here Gadamer's model is our interpretive engagement with written texts and works of art. For Gadamer, such encounters involve a dialogical back-and-forth, where our own prior beliefs and assumptions shape our reception material, and are shaped in turn by what we learn from it. Over the course of the book, Gadamer attempts to universalize the experience of the interpretation of written texts, arguing that it applies to all dimensions of lived human experience.

In order to develop this argument, Gadamer engages the work of a number of historical figures, both tracing the development of a historical consciousness in European philosophy. For Gadamer, such a historical consciousness involves the recognition of the historicity of truth and meaning; what appears as philosophically significant varies across time and one may not be able to adopt the perspective of a past philosopher. Nevertheless, Gadamer insists that contemporary thought does not proceed independently of a broader intellectual heritage insofar as our own understanding of the world is shaped by philosophical and intellectual history. In this way, for Gadamer, we engage the world in a fashion that is always mediated by tradition and history, and the latter provide

us with starting assumptions or 'prejudices' that determine the way that we experience ourselves and others. Significantly, however, such prejudices do not supply a static set of beliefs that is given once and for all; rather, in applying such founding judgments in our everyday activities, we are required to interpret them anew as to fit our own circumstances, an idea that he expresses as 'historically-effected consciousness.' For Gadamer, such a consciousness is characterized «by letting itself experience tradition and by keeping itself open to the truth claim encountered in it³¹». In this way, it allows itself to be questioned and challenged by tradition even as it questions the teachings of that tradition itself: «The hermeneutical consciousness culminates not in methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man from the man captivated by dogma³²». Thus, the 'historically effected consciousness' is open-minded with respect to the truth of such prejudices as well the encounters we have with new ideas and thoughts, and it is precisely in this fashion that we resist the 'redarkening' of these prejudices and their ossification into dogma. In other words, for Gadamer, the beliefs that form the underlying element of human social and intellectual life are subject to continual re-interpretation and re-application, and indeed, Gadamer insists that such an interpretive process characterizes human experience as a whole.

In order to capture this phenomenon of the interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience, Gadamer deploys a philosophical conception of horizon, which he defines as «the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point³³». The horizon of our understanding is determined by historical traditions of which we are a part as well as our own present circumstances. However; as with the literal horizon, the metaphorical horizon of our understanding is not fixed, and its limits are subject to change:

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. The surrounding horizon is not set in motion by historical consciousness. But in it this motion becomes aware of itself³⁴.

In particular, our horizons are transformed and put into question in and through the encounter with otherness; foreign forms of understanding that occupy their own horizons of meaning.

For Gadamer, a productive encounter between different perspectives inhabiting different horizons ideally results in a 'fusion of horizons'. On this

³¹ H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, 2nd, revised edition, London 2004, p. 355

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

vision, understanding another perspective does not entail leaving one's own horizon and adopting a new one, as if one could enter directly into the mind of another, but rather involves interpreting it in the light of one's own horizon. This process projects a larger, more universal, horizon in which the understanding considers the various perspectives together:

Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of 'horizon' suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have³⁵.

Thus, in the act of understanding, Gadamer argues that we seek to overcome our initial, limited horizon by considering alternative perspectives and ways of understanding the world and ourselves. While there is thus something like the construction of a single horizon of meaning for Gadamer, the process of projecting such a universal standpoint is always ongoing and in the service of an open-ended production of understanding:

In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves³⁶.

By interpreting the notion of a philosophical perspective or point of view in terms of the concept of horizon, Gadamer argues that a perspective is not something self-identical or given once and for all. It is something that not only emerges in a dynamic relationship with the past and tradition but which is also continually shaped by its encounter with new ideas and perspectives.

In light of Gadamer's account of the fusion of horizons that takes place in the act of understanding, we can see why he would reject what he took to be Leibniz's grand synthesis. Unlike in Leibniz, the goal of understanding is not, for Gadamer, the construction of a universal standpoint that would function as a central perspective that could determine the proper place and role of each individual perspective. As we saw in Leibniz, the distribution of the truth across multiple perspectives, times, and places, was ultimately grounded in a metaphysical account of creation dependent upon the infinite mind of God. Rather, the development of a more universal horizon serves an open-ended fusion of finite horizons, in which we constantly transcend our initial limited perspectives and prejudices in coming to agreement with others.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

5. Conclusion: Gadamer as Exemplar of a Contemporary Leibnizianism

What does it mean to be a Leibnizian today? It might appear natural to answer this question examining the concrete influences Leibniz has had on recent intellectual endeavors, or by asking how concepts developed by Leibniz – for instance the monad – may figure within contemporary philosophical thinking. An alternative way of approaching the question, however, could be to identify how one might adopt a certain Leibnizian style or approach to philosophy, for instance, his characteristic conciliatory and synthetic approach to philosophical ideas.

I have sought to show that we can potentially understand the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer as representing just such a contemporary form of Leibnizian philosophical practice. Although there is little reason to think that Leibniz's thought worked a direct influence on Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer acknowledged a kinship between him and Leibniz, claiming that he agreed with Leibniz's own claim to have «approved of nearly all he read³⁷». On this basis, I have argued that we can understand both Leibniz and Gadamer as developing conceptions of philosophical truth as emerging from the interaction of multiple distinct points of view, and that they consequently affirm philosophical and rhetorical ethics that stress substantial engagement and agreement with the views of others.

Importantly, however, Gadamer did not think it was possible to merely repeat the type of grand philosophical synthesis performed by Leibniz in the seventeenth-century. Indeed, Gadamer conceived of philosophy as an open-ended fusion of horizons in which philosophy strives to prevent its own insights from ossifying into dogmatism by continuously coming to new understanding. In emphasizing the finitude of understanding, Gadamer evades a form of idealism present in Leibniz, namely the way in which his metaphysics grounds all of reality, as well as all philosophical concepts and truths in the infinite intellect of God. Thus, where Gadamer saw Leibniz as a 'hermeneutic exemplar' in the history of philosophy, Leibniz might respond in the negative to the question of whether we ought to view Gadamer as an 'exemplar of Leibnizianism.' However, if Gadamer was right about the nature of philosophical thinking, it is ultimately up to us as readers to answer this question for ourselves.

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³⁷ Gadamer, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 20.