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CLASSICS FOR ENGLISH READERS AND STUDENTS.
EDITED BY GEORGE S. MORRIS.

LEIBNIZ'S NEW ESSAYS CONCERNING THE HUMAN
UNDERSTANDING.

LEIBNIZ'S NEW ESSAYS
CONCERNING THE HUMAN
UNDERSTANDING.

A CRITICAL EXPOSITION.

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PREFACE.

THE purpose of the series of which the present volume is one, is not, as will be seen by reference to the statement in the initial volume, to sum up *in toto* the system of any philosopher, but to

give a “critical exposition” of some one masterpiece. In treating the “Nouveaux Essais” of Leibniz, I have found myself obliged, at times, to violate the letter of this expressed intention, in order to fulfil its spirit. The “Nouveaux Essais,” in spite of its being one of the two most extended philosophical writings of Leibniz, is a compendium of comments, rather than a connected argument or exposition. It has all the suggestiveness and richness of a notebook, but with much also of its fragmentariness. I have therefore been obliged to supplement my account

of it by constant references to the other writings of Leibniz, and occasionally to take considerable liberty with the order of the treatment of topics. Upon the whole, this book will be found, I hope, to be a faithful reflex not only of Leibniz’s thought, but also of his discussions in the “Nouveaux Essais.”

In the main, the course of philosophic thought since the time of Leibniz has been such as to render almost self-evident his limitations, and to suggest needed corrections and amplifications. Indeed, it is much easier for those whose thoughts follow the turn that Kant has given modern thinking to appreciate the defects of Leibniz than to realize his greatness. I have endeavored, therefore, in the body of the work, to identify my thought with that of Leibniz as much as possible, to assume his standpoint and method, and, for the most part, to confine express criticism upon his limitations to the final chapter. In particular, I have attempted to bring out the relations of philosophy to the growing science of his

times, to state the doctrine of pre-established harmony as he himself meant it, and to give something like consistency and coherency to his doctrine of material existence and of nature. This last task seemed especially to require doing. I have also endeavored to keep in mind, throughout, Leibniz’s relations to Locke, and to show the “Nouveaux Essais” as typical of the

distinction between characteristic British and German thought.

JOHN DEWEY.

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LEIBNIZ'S NEW ESSAYS CONCERNING THE HUMAN UNDERSTANDING.

CHAPTER I. THE MAN.

“HE who knows me only by my writings does not know me,” said Leibniz. These words—true, indeed, of every writer, but true of Leibniz in a way which gives a peculiar interest and charm to his life—must be our excuse for prefacing what is to be said of his “New Essays concerning the Human Understanding” with a brief biographical sketch.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz was born in Leipzig June 21, 1646. His father, who died when Leibniz was only six years old, was a professor in the university and a notary of considerable practice. From him the future philosopher seems to have derived his extraordinary industry and love of detail. Such accounts as we have of him show no traces of the wonderful intellectual genius of his son, but only a diligent, plodding, faithful, and religious man, a thoroughly conscientious husband, jurist, and professor. Nor in the lines of physical heredity can

we account for the unique career of Leibniz by his mother’s endowments. The fact, however, that she was patient in all trial, living in peace with her neighbors, anxious for unity and concord with all people, even with those not well disposed to her, throws great light upon the fundamental trait of Leibniz’s ethical nature. As in so many cases, it is the inherited moral characteristics which form the basis of the intellectual nature. The love of unity which was a moral trait in Leibniz’s mother became in him the hunger for a harmonious and unified mental world; the father’s devotion to detail showed itself as the desire for knowledge as minute and comprehensive as it was inter-related.

Left without his father, he was by the advice of a discerning friend allowed free access to the library. Leibniz never ceased to count this one of the greatest fortunes of his life. Writing in after

years to a friend, he says:—

“When I lost my father, and was left without any direction in my studies, I had the luck to get at books in all languages, of all religions, upon all sciences, and to read them without any regular order, just as my own impulse led me. From this I obtained the great advantage that I was freed from ordinary prejudices, and introduced to many things of which I should otherwise never have thought.”

In a philosophical essay, in which he describes himself under the name of Gulielmus Pacidius, he says:—

“Wilhelm Friedlieb, a German by birth, who lost his father in his early years, was led to study through the innate tendency of his spirit; and the freedom with which he moved about in the sciences was equal to this innate impulse. He buried himself, a boy eight years old, in a library, staying there sometimes whole days, and, hardly stammering Latin, he took up every book which pleased his eyes. Opening and shutting them without any choice, he sipped now here, now there, lost himself in one, skipped over another, as the clearness of expression or of content attracted him. He seemed to be directed by the *Tolle et lege* of a higher voice. As good fortune would have it, he gave himself up to the ancients, in whom he at first understood nothing, by degrees a little, finally all that was really necessary, until he assumed not only a certain coloring of their expression, but also of their thought,—just as those who go about in the sun, even while they are occupied with other things, get sun-browned.”

And he goes on to tell us that their influence always remained with him. Their human, their important, their comprehensive ideas, grasping the whole of life in one image, together with their clear, natural, and transparent mode of expression, adapted precisely to their thoughts, seemed to him to be in the greatest contrast with the writings of moderns, without definiteness or order in expression,

and without vitality or purpose in thought,—“written as if for another world.” Thus Leibniz

learned two of the great lessons of his life,—to seek always for clearness of diction and for pertinence and purpose of ideas.

Historians and poets first occupied him; but when in his school-life, a lad of twelve or thirteen years, he came to the study of logic, he was greatly struck, he says, by the “ordering and analysis of thoughts which he found there.” He gave himself up to making tables of categories and predicaments, analyzing each book that he read into suitable topics, and arranging these into classes and sub-classes. We can imagine the astonishment of his playmates as he burst upon them with a demand to classify this or that idea, to find its appropriate predicament. Thus he was led naturally to the philosophic books in his father’s library,—to Plato and to Aristotle, to the Scholastics. Suarez, in particular, among the latter, he read; and traces of his influences are to be found in the formulation of his own philosophic system. At about this same time he took great delight in the theological works with which his father’s library abounded, reading with equal ease and pleasure the writings of the Lutherans and of the Reformed Church, of the Jesuits and the Jansenists, of the Thomists and the Arminians. The result was, he tells us, that he was strengthened in the Lutheran faith of his family, but, as we may easily imagine from his after life, made tolerant of all forms of faith.

In 1661 the boy Leibniz, fifteen years old, entered the University of Leipzig. If we glance back upon

his attainments, we find him thoroughly at home in Latin, having made good progress in Greek, acquainted with the historians and poets of antiquity, acquainted with the contemporary range of science, except in mathematics and physics, deeply read

and interested in ancient and scholastic philosophy and in the current theological discussions. Of himself he says:—

“Two things were of extraordinary aid to me: in the first place, I was self-taught; and in the second, as soon as I entered upon any science I sought for something new, even though I did not as yet thoroughly understand the old. I thus gained two things: I did not fill my mind with things empty and to be unlearned afterwards,—things resting upon the assertion of the teacher, and not upon reason; and secondly, I never rested till I got down to the very roots of the science and reached its principles.”

While there is always a temptation to force the facts which we know of a man's early life, so as to make them seem to account for what appears in mature years, and to find symbolisms and analogies which do not exist, we are not going astray, I think, if we see foreshadowed in this early education of Leibniz the two leading traits of his later thought,—universality and individuality. The range of Leibniz's investigations already marks him as one who will be content with no fundamental principle which does not mirror the universe. The freedom with which he carried them on is testimony to the fact that even at this age the idea of self-development,

of individual growth from within, was working upon him. In the fact, also, that he was self-taught we find doubtless the reason that he alone of the thinkers of this period did not have to retrace his steps, to take a hostile attitude towards the ideas into which he was educated, and to start anew upon a foundation then first built. The development of the thought of Leibniz is so gradual, continuous, and constant that it may serve as a model of the law by which the “monad” acts. Is not his early acquaintance with ancient literature and mediæval philosophy the reason that he could afterwards write that his philosophical system “connects Plato with Democritus, Aristotle with Descartes, the Scholastics with the

moderns, theology and morals with reason”? And who can fail to see in the impartiality, the comprehensiveness, of his self-education the prophecy of the time when he can write of his ideas that “there are united in them, as in a centre of perspective, the ideas of the Sceptics in attributing to sensible things only a slight degree of reality; of the Pythagoreans and Platonists, who reduce all to harmonies, numbers, and ideas; of Parmenides and Plotinus, with their One and All; of the Stoics, with their notion of necessity, compatible with the spontaneity of other schools; of the vital philosophy of the Cabalists, who find feeling everywhere; of the forms and entelechies of Aristotle and the Schoolmen, united with the mechanical explanation of phenomena according to Democritus and the moderns”?

But we must hurry along over the succeeding years of his life. In the university the study of law was his principal occupation, as he had decided to follow in the footsteps of his father. It cannot be said that the character of the instruction or of the instructors at Leipzig was such as to give much nutriment or stimulus to a mind like that of Leibniz. He became acquainted there, however, with the Italian philosophy of the sixteenth century,—a philosophy which, as formulated by Cardanus and Campanella, formed the transition from Scholastic philosophy to the “mechanical” mode of viewing the universe. He had here also his first introduction to Descartes. The consequences of the new vision opened to Leibniz must be told in his own words: “I was but a child when I came to know Aristotle; even the Scholastics did not frighten me; and I in no way regret this now. Plato and Plotinus gave me much delight, not to speak of other philosophers of antiquity. Then I fell in with the writings of modern philosophy, and I recall the time when, a boy of fifteen years, I went walking in a little wood near Leipzig, the Rosenthal, in order to consider whether I should hold to the doctrine of substantial forms. Finally the mechanical theory conquered, and thus I was led to the study of the mathematical

sciences.”

To the study of the mathematical sciences! Surely words of no mean import for either the future of Leibniz or of mathematics. But his Leipzig studies did not take him very far in this new direction.

Only the elements of Euclid were taught there, and these by a lecturer of such confused style that Leibniz seems alone to have understood them. In Jena, however, where he went for a semester, things were somewhat better. Weigel, a mathematician of some fame, an astronomer, a jurist, and a philosopher, taught there, and introduced Leibniz into the lower forms of analysis. But the Thirty Years' War had not left Germany in a state of high culture, and in after years Leibniz lamented the limitations of his early mathematical training, remarking that if he had spent his youth in Paris, he would have enriched science earlier. By 1666 Leibniz had finished his university career, having in previous years attained the degrees of bachelor of philosophy and master of philosophy. It is significant that for the first he wrote a thesis upon the principle of individuation,—the principle which in later years became the basis of his philosophy. This early essay, however, is rather an exhibition of learning and of dexterity in handling logical methods than a real anticipation of his afterthought.

For his second degree, he wrote a thesis upon the application of philosophic ideas to juridic procedure,—considerations which never ceased to occupy him. At about the same time appeared his earliest independent work, “De Arte Combinatoria.” From his study of mathematics, and especially of algebraic methods, Leibniz had become convinced that the source of all science is,—first, analysis; second,

symbolic representation of the fundamental concepts, the symbolism avoiding the ambiguities and vagueness of language;

and thirdly, the synthesis and interpretation of the symbols. It seemed to Leibniz that it ought to be possible to find the simplest notions in all the sciences, to discover general rules for calculating all their varieties of combination, and thus to attain the same certainty and generality of result that characterize mathematics. Leibniz never gave up this thought. Indeed, in spirit his philosophy is but its application, with the omission of symbols, on the side of the general notions fundamental to all science. It was also the idea of his age,—the idea that inspired Spinoza and the *Aufklärung*, the idea that inspired philosophical thinking until Kant gave it its death-blow by demonstrating the distinction between the methods of philosophy and of mathematical and physical science.

In 1666 Leibniz should have received his double doctorate of philosophy and of law; but petty jealousies and personal fears prevented his presenting himself for the examination. Disgusted with his treatment, feeling that the ties that bound him to Leipzig were severed by the recent death of his mother, anxious to study mathematics further, and, as he confesses, desiring, with the natural eagerness of youth, to see more of the world, he left Leipzig forever, and entered upon his *Wanderjahre*. He was prepared to be no mean citizen of the world. In his education he had gone from the historians to

the poets, from the poets to the philosophers and the Scholastics, from them to the theologians and Church Fathers; then to the jurists, to the mathematicians, and then again to philosophy and to law.

He first directed his steps to the University of Altdorf; here he obtained his doctorate in law, and was offered a professorship, which he declined,—apparently because he felt that his time was not yet come, and that when it should come, it would not be in the narrow limits of a country village. From Altdorf he went to Nürnberg; here all that need concern us is the fact that he joined a

society of alchemists (*fraternitas roseæcrucis*), and was made their secretary. Hereby he gained three things,—a knowledge of chemistry; an acquaintance with a number of scientific men of different countries, with whom, as secretary, he carried on correspondence; and the friendship of Boineburg, a diplomat of the court of the Elector and Archbishop of Mainz. This friendship was the means of his removing to Frankfurt. Here, under the direction of the Elector, he engaged in remodelling Roman law so as to adapt it for German use, in writing diplomatic tracts, letters, and essays upon theological matters, and in editing an edition of Nizolius,—a now forgotten philosophical writer. One of the most noteworthy facts in connection with this edition is that Leibniz pointed out the fitness of the German language for philosophical uses, and urged its employment,—a memorable fact in connection with the later development of German thought. Another

important tract which he wrote was one urging the alliance of all German States for the purpose of advancing their internal and common interests. Here, as so often, Leibniz was almost two centuries in advance of his times. But the chief thing in connection with the stay of Leibniz at Mainz was the cause for which he left it. Louis XIV. had broken up the Triple Alliance, and showed signs of attacking Holland and the German Empire. It was then proposed to him that it would be of greater glory to himself and of greater advantage to France that he should move against Turkey and Egypt. The mission of presenting these ideas to the great king was intrusted to Leibniz, and in 1672 he went to Paris.

The plan failed completely,—so completely that we need say no more about it. But the journey to Paris was none the less the turning-point in the career of Leibniz. It brought him to the centre of intellectual civilization,—to a centre compared with which the highest attainments of disrupted and disheartened Germany were comparative barbarism. Molière was still alive, and Racine was at

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