

Note XV

On Leibniz's "Distractions"

We have seen (Chap. 5, §22) how Leibniz complained that a “thousand distractions” had prevented him from drawing up the *Elements of Philosophy* that was to be the substitute for his great encyclopedia, and that at the end of his life he would have published his *spécieuse générale*, “if only he had been less distracted” (Chap. 5, end). It is therefore interesting to know what these numerous pursuits were that checked and ultimately frustrated his great plans.

The principal one was naturally the history of Brunswick that he had undertaken for his master and patron the Duke of Hanover.¹ At first, he had willingly accepted (and even provoked) this assignment, in which his mind, curious for facts, abandoned abstract speculations while investigating archives and examining the documents in them. His journey through Germany and Italy had brought him the joy of discovering and proving a historical truth.² He was hoping soon to be relieved of his work as historian and to be able to return to his favorite project; already he submitted a plan for it to the Duke of Hanover, in order to interest him in his enterprise³ and perhaps to request from him “a little assistance.”⁴ He retained always the hope of gaining the support of a prince for the execution of his great work. But the more progress he made, the more his labors were extended and expanded, driving him on to new historical investigations or new scientific studies, such as his *Protogaea* (1691).⁵ He was overwhelmed by the mass of materials he had gathered and accumulated: he published only a portion of them, first in his *Codex juris gentium diplomaticus* (Part I, 1693; Part II, 1700), a collection of diplomatic documents, then in his *Accessiones historicae* (1698), and finally in the collection of the *Scriptores rerum Brunsvicensium illustrationi inservientes* (1701-11). As for his historical opus, the *Annales Brunsvicenses*, he worked on it until his death and left it unfinished.⁶

¹ See Appendix IV, §7.

² See the beginning of his letter to Arnauld, Venice, 23 March 1690 (*Phil.*, II, 134). Two years earlier, at the start of his journey, he had written to him: “If I one day find enough leisure, I want to complete my thoughts on the general characteristic or manner of universal calculation, which must serve in the other sciences as in mathematics.” Leibniz to Arnauld, Nuremberg, 14 January 1688 (*Phil.*, II, 134).

³ “Having had the honor of conversing with Your Royal Highness and seeing his enlightenment and the love that he has for the truth, I take the liberty of speaking to him of some of my plans, to which I intend to devote myself if God gives me the favor of finishing the history of the most serene house.” Leibniz to the Duke of Hanover (*Phil.*, VII, 24). Cf. Leibniz to Bernstorff (Venice, 17/27 February 1690), in which, after having given an account to the minister of his mission to Italy, he adds: “I hope also to enjoy one day the fruit of my labors, if God gives me enough life for this” (published by L. Stein, in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* I, 239).

⁴ The last words of the letter quoted above.

⁵ Published by Scheid (Göttigen, 1749); Dutens, II, 181ff.

⁶ It was published only by Pertz (Hanover, 1843).

From this time on, he was constantly “distracted” from his logical and metaphysical meditations by all sorts of pursuits, to which may be added the responsibilities of his office and his court duties. He wrote in 1695:

“It can hardly be said how extraordinary distracted I am. I dig things out of the archives, I inspect old papers, I search for unknown manuscripts. From these I try to throw light on the history of Brunswick. I both receive and send a great number of letters.⁷ I have indeed so many new things in mathematics, so many philosophical ideas, so many other scholarly investigations, which I would not want to be lost, that I often hesitate, wavering between tasks, and feel almost like that line from Ovid: *Inopem me copia fecit* [wealth has made me destitute]”; and, after having cited among his projects his *characteristica situs* (see Chap. 9), he added: “Nevertheless, all these labors of mine, if you exclude the historical, are nearly clandestine, for you know that in the court something far different is sought and expected.”⁸

In a letter to Johann Bernoulli of 28 December 1696,⁹ Leibniz listed all his pursuits: first, the history of the House of Brunswick, then the Diet of Ratisbonne, the *Irenical Treatise* (dedicated to the union of the Protestant churches), the *Elements of Eternal Law*, the second volume of the *Codex diplomaticus*, the *New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances*, the arithmetical machine (the third version of which he had had constructed), chemical and medical studies, research on the origins of the German peoples, a memorandum to the Duke of Wolfenbüttel *On the Restoration of the German Language*,¹⁰ a letter to a great princess “on the nature of souls,”¹¹ his correspondence with Father Grimaldi in China, and finally his controversy with Sturm.

In a letter to Jacob Bernoulli (1696), Leibniz speaks of his project for a “science of infinity” (treated by the infinitesimal calculus)¹² and of his other plans: “Since I have certain philosophical meditations that seem to me no less certain and useful than mathematical ones, I will think also about ordering them, lest any should be lost; just as I once also conceived some *Elements of Eternal Law*,¹³ not to speak of other things. But history and politics take up too much of my time so long as the court must be satisfied.”¹⁴

It was to these philosophical and logical projects that he was alluding when he wrote: “I have had many wonderful ideas in many fields, but the historico-political robs me of much time; still, it also needs to be done, especially if one is in service.”¹⁵ In another

⁷ The library in Hanover possesses more than 15,000 letters from Leibniz. He himself says that on average he wrote more than 300 per year (Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, 2 July 1697, *Math.*, III, 434). See Bodemann, *Der Briefwechsel des G.W. Leibniz* (Hanover, 1889).

⁸ Leibniz to Placcius, 5 September 1695 (Dutens, VI.1, 59-60; quoted in part by Gerhardt, *Phil.*, IV, 413, note, and by Guhrauer, II, 115-7). Cf. Leibniz to L'Hospital (*Math.*, II, 219, 227).

⁹ *Math.*, III, 347ff.

¹⁰ See p. 65, note 1.

¹¹ Probably his letter to the Electress Sophie of Hannover of 4 November 1696, concerning the souls of beasts and Cartesianism (*Phil.*, VII, 541).

¹² He must have given it up following the publication of the *Analyse des infiniment petits pour l'intelligence des lignes courbes*, by the Marquis de Hospital, which appeared the same year in Paris (see the letter to the Electress Sophie, cited in the previous note).

¹³ See Note IX.

¹⁴ *Math.*, III, 47. Cf. Letter to Jacob Bernoulli, 24 September 1690: “...especially since now I am distracted by very different historico-political thoughts. When they are completed I hope to have more freedom” (*Math.*, III, 19).

¹⁵ Leibniz to Tschirnhaus, 1693 (*Math.*, IV, 514; *Brief.*, I, 479).

letter to Tschirnhaus,¹⁶ he repeats the words of Ovid: “Inopem me copia fecit,” and he says that he would need young men to assist him in his labors.¹⁷ He compares himself with Descartes, who, he says, did not proceed in the right way, since he sought only hired workmen and not assistants associated with his studies.

Leibniz in fact employed several young men as secretaries around this period: two lawyers, Christian Ulrich Grupen and Johann Wilhem von Göbel, to aid him in his work on the law;¹⁸ and later Hodann, whom he charged with collecting definitions from various encyclopedias.¹⁹

He no more forgot his characteristic than his encyclopedia. In a letter to Johann Bernoulli of 2 July 1697, after having listed his many pursuits, among them the *Elements of Eternal Law* that had long been promised to the public, he says: “but most of all I strive for a new analysis, much more distinguished than the received version, which would benefit all human reasoning.”²⁰ He wrote to Thomas Burnett concerning his art of demonstration: “But I hope sometime to explain this more fully, if God should give me life.”²¹ Later, in a letter to Johann Bernoulli of 6 June 1710, he complains again of the number of his occupations; he hopes to be free of his historical labors in two years.²² But this wish was not to be granted, for he wrote in the very year of his death: “I am now absorbed in bringing to an end my great historical work whose materials I gathered many years ago. It describes the ancient events of Brunswick, and at the same time the annals of the Western Emperors from the beginning of the reign of Charles the Great all the way to the end of the reign of Emperor Henry II.” He hoped to have it finished within the year and expressed the desire of going on to other “less popular” projects.²³ Death surprised him before he was able to carry them out.

¹⁶ 21 March 1694 (*Math.*, IV, 523-5; *Brief.*, I, 493-4).

¹⁷ See the letter to Remond of 10 January 1714 (quoted at the end of Chap. 5).

¹⁸ Guhrauer, II, 117.

¹⁹ See Chap. 5, §24, and the letters to l'Hospital of 1699 and 1701 (quoted p. 395, note 3).

²⁰ *Math.*, III, 434.

²¹ Leibniz to Burnett, 1699 (*Phil.*, III, 259).

²² *Math.*, III, 849.

²³ Leibniz to Johann Bernoulli, 31 January 1716 (*Math.*, III, 957).