

Massimo Mugnai and the Study of Leibniz

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Abstract

This essay is an appreciation of Massimo Mugnai's many contributions to Leibniz scholarship, as well as to the history of logic and history of philosophy more generally.

Massimo Mugnai will be familiar to most readers of the *Leibniz Review* as a frequent contributor, and also as editor of "Leibniz Texts". Certainly his work on Leibniz's theory of relations is known to almost all modern interpreters of Leibniz, for whom it often serves as a touchstone for assessing the viability of their own interpretations of his metaphysics. But his biographical details will perhaps not be so familiar, so I will begin with a sketch of his career path before proceeding to his philosophical contributions.

Mugnai received his laureate at the University of Florence in 1971 under the supervision of the historian of philosophy, Paolo Rossi (famous for his *Logic and the Art of Memory* or *Clavis Universalis*, among other works). The subject of Mugnai's thesis—perhaps reflecting Rossi's penchant for restoring the historical credentials of thinkers whose importance has become forgotten or obscured—was on Leibniz and the Encyclopedists of the Herborn Circle. This circle, centered on Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588-1638), included Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld (c. 1605-55) and Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670). As Mugnai has shown, Leibniz was particularly enamored of Bisterfeld, whose doctrines of universal harmony and the connection of all things through relations, as well as his theses that every single being is intrinsically active and has some perception and appetite, all became signature theses of Leibniz too.

After graduating from Florence, Mugnai took advantage of a bursary from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) to research in the Leibniz Archives in Hanover in 1971-72 (a bursary later renewed for further research at the Leibniz-Forschungsstelle in Münster in the summer of 1979), and then spent the next few years (1974-80) as a researcher in Tullio Gregory's Centro di studi per il Lessico intellettuale Europeo in Rome. In 1981 he won the competition for a chair in the history of philosophy, and taught the History of Modern Philosophy at the University of Bari from 1981 to 1984. In February 1984 Mugnai revisited Münster on a Humboldt Foundation bursary to collaborate on the critical edition of Leibniz's

writings for a few months, before returning home to Florence to take up a position as Professor in the History of Logic in the Department of Philosophy. He taught at the Università di Firenze until 2002, with a break of a year (1994-5) to participate in a research group at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Jerusalem, of which he is a fellow. Since 2002 he has been professor of the History and Philosophy of Logic at the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa.

In the English-speaking world Mugnai is known chiefly for his magisterial *Leibniz' Theory of Relations* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 1992). The topic had taken center-stage in Anglo-American circles as a result of Russell's influential interpretation of Leibniz as "denying relations" because of his commitment to subject-predicate logic. This aspect of Russell's interpretation had been challenged by Hidé Ishiguro and Jaakko Hintikka, who urged that predicates representing relational properties (such as "is taller than Timmias") could easily be contained in a subject, and that the denial of relations would make nonsense of the central Leibnizian notions of harmony and representation. But Russell's thesis was then defended in a more nuanced version by Benson Mates in his *The Philosophy of Leibniz* (1984), who scorned relational properties and presented Leibniz as a nominalist who rejected relations and other abstractions. In his book Mugnai subjected Leibniz's theory of relations to a detailed historical examination. His conclusions defy easy summary in a note of this kind. Suffice to say that, bringing his considerable knowledge of the history of logic to bear on the topic, he is able to present Leibniz's commitment to nominalism in the context of the scholastic theories which formed its background. As he notes, even the realists of the late scholastic tradition did not maintain that relations taken in abstraction from their relata were real, while Leibniz, like many conceptualist/nominalists, held that relational accidents result from (and are therefore not really distinguished from) their intrinsic fundamentals, the modifications of substances. Nevertheless, Mugnai argues, Leibniz also held that the complete concept of each individual contains its relations to all other things (all of its extrinsic as well as its intrinsic denominations), so that in this sense relational properties may be said to inhere in the complete concept of a given individual. This conclusion has great bearing on Leibniz's metaphysics, supporting the interpretation of him as a super-essentialist: every Leibnizian individual is world-bound, and can belong to only one possible world.

More recently Mugnai has returned to the topic of relational accidents in his "Leibniz's Ontology of Relations: A Last Word?" (*Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, Volume VI,

ed. Garber and Rutherford, 2012, pp. 171-208), comparing Leibniz's views with those of writers on logic he would have read in the Herzog August Library of Wolfenbüttel, such as Walter Burley, Jacob Martini, Obadiah Walker, J. C. Hundeshagen and Martin Smiglecki. Here he is largely motivated by the claim of Dennis Plaisted (*Leibniz on Purely Extrinsic Denominations*, Rochester, 2002) that relational accidents could simply *be* the foundations of relations for Leibniz. Mugnai concludes that it is rather “the property which constitutes the foundation [that] inheres; and the relational accident ‘resting’ on it does not add anything real to the reality of the foundation”.

Mugnai has also written extensively on related topics. Particularly noteworthy are his papers on Leibniz's contributions to logic and to the philosophy of language. In papers on the former he shows that Leibniz clearly understood that his logic of concept inclusion could also be interpreted extensionally, so that the concept A's being included in the concept B would entail that all individuals falling under B would also fall under A. For Leibniz the intension (a word he coined) of A would be all those concepts entailed by it; he preferred the intensional point of view because it does not involve questions of existence of the individuals concerned. On this understanding, Leibniz produced a logical system that fell just shy of being a Boolean algebra when interpreted extensionally: it would be equivalent to “a ‘meet semilattice’ with the operation of complement”. His system lacks any formulas relating to disjunction; although he recognized De Morgan's Laws in passing, he did not incorporate them into his system. Among the other issues that Mugnai has helped to clarify concerning Leibniz's logical studies are whether he anticipated Frege's quantifiers—Leibniz had quantifiers of a kind, but these pertained to his logic under the intensional interpretation—and whether he could properly accommodate negation in his intensional interpretation.

Mugnai's work on Leibniz's contributions to the understanding of language is well summarized in his forthcoming handbook article, “Universal language, *Ars characteristica*, logical calculus, and natural language,” (forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Leibniz*, ed. Maria Rosa Antognazza), which charts all Leibniz's contributions: his characteristic as a logic of discovery, his espousal of a universal grammar, his contributions to the development of international auxiliary languages, and his etymological work on the origins of European languages in a proto-European tongue. Another gem is his *Studia Leibnitiana* paper, “Leibniz on Individuation: From

the Early Years to the ‘Discourse’ and Beyond” (2001, pp. 36-54), in which Mugnai gives an authoritative account of the development of Leibniz’s thinking on the problem of individuation from his Bachelor’s dissertation under Thomasius to his mature position.

In Italy Mugnai’s contributions to Leibniz studies have been immense. With Enrico Pasini he co-edited and co-translated the 3-volume editions of Leibniz’s writings, *Scritti filosofici di Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* (Torino: UTET, 2000). He also put out what is in my estimation the best extant introduction to Leibniz’s thought (with due deference to the excellent introductions by Stuart Brown and Nicholas Jolley), *Introduzione alla filosofia di Leibniz* (Torino: Einaudi, 2001), although unfortunately it has not been translated into English. His 90-page monograph *Leibniz e la logica simbolica* (Sansoni, 1973), was translated as *Leibniz’s Logic* (Kluwer, 1990), and his *La Logica da Leibniz a Frege* (Loescher) appeared in 1982.

Mugnai’s erudition is hardly restricted to Leibniz, however, and extends across the whole history of Western philosophy. He has written on aspects of traditional logic in Germany after Leibniz, and has written extensively on Boole’s algebraic logic. In 1984 he published a book on Marx, *Il mondo rovesciato* (Il Mulino, 1984), with special attention to the role of contradiction and Marx’s theory of value. Last year he published an edition (with Massimo Girondino) of Gerolamo Saccheri’s *Logica demonstrativa* (SNS Pisa, 2012), with a 62-page introduction and scholarly notes to Girondino’s Italian translation, *Logica dimostrativa*. His most recent book is *Possibile/Necessario* (Il Mulino, 2013), a study of the evolution of the meaning of these terms, replete with their heavy philosophical freight, from Aristotle and the Stoics, through Abelard, Ockham and Buridan and then Leibniz and Kant, to the modern studies on semantics of language from Carnap to Kripke.

Like others trained in the Italian tradition of scholarship, Mugnai brings to bear a profound knowledge of the history of European thought, together with a much broader philosophical perspective than that typical of analytic philosophy. Like many of his compatriots, too, he is able to take advantage of a strong linguistic competence, being able to read, write and speak Italian, English, German and French, as well as to read Spanish and, obviously, Latin. In contrast to his intellectual forebears, however, Mugnai has also engaged with the work of contemporary scholars working from a more issue-centered approach, refusing to dismiss them as mere “Anglo-American analytic philosophers”, and taking a fully internationalist approach to the

furthering of knowledge. He is a member of the Leibniz Gesellschaft of Hanover, and is on the editorial boards of *Studia Leibnitiana*, *History and Philosophy of Logic*, *Rivista di storia della filosofia*, and this journal. In Pisa, he has collaborated with the renowned mathematician Mariano Giaquinta (who runs the Centro di Ricerca Matematica “Ennio De Giorgi” just across the Piazza dei Cavalieri from the Scuola Normale) on various conferences and research projects in the history of mathematics, most recently in a study group on the history of the infinite. But this hardly begins to tell the story of Mugnai’s real constructive influence on international and interdisciplinary scholarship. This would require the testimonials of all the less established scholars he has helped to acquire positions, and of those (like me) who have been the beneficiaries of his generous invitations to lecture and take part in conferences in Italy. I do not have a list of all Mugnai’s students, but one in particular stands out: Vincenzo de Risi, who graduated from the Scuola Normale with the highest honors attainable, and converted his PhD thesis into the inestimably erudite *Geometry and Monadology* (Birkhäuser Verlag, 2007).

On a personal note, it has been and continues to be a privilege and a joy to know Massimo, and to interact with him and the force that is his wonderful wife, Giulietta (for whom he is always “Mugnai!”). All those who have come to know him will attest to his modesty and generosity of spirit, which, as much as his considerable intellectual accomplishments, have contributed to his huge influence on Leibniz studies.

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