

Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm von (1646-1716)

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Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm von (1646-1716), a philosopher whose writings filtered to the American Transcendentalists through the German Idealists, was born in Leipzig, the son and grandson of professors. He studied philosophy and law at the University of Leipzig and became secretary of the Rosicrucian Society in Nuremberg, where he met Johann Christian von Boyneburg, a retired statesman, and, through Boyneburg's influence, secured a position with the elector of Mainz. In 1676 he was taken into the service of Johann Friedrich, the duke of Hanover, where he spent the rest of his life. After Friedrich's death in 1679, he served under Ernst August and then under Georg Ludwig, who became king of Great Britain in 1714. He was made president for life of the Berlin Society of Sciences in 1700. Culturally, he is perhaps best known for his work on the *Universal Encyclopedia*, an ambitious attempt to collect and arrange all human knowledge. Such sweeping aims were also central to his attempts to bring together the common beliefs of all Christian faiths and his promotion of cooperation between all scientists, philosophers, and medical doctors. He is also remembered for his public argument with Sir Isaac Newton, engendered over the primacy of the discovery of the calculus.

Leibniz's most important philosophical work, in the context of American Transcendentalism, is his *Monadology*, which stems from his thoughts on the relation between mind and body: the human soul (as with all things, created by God and self-contained) evolves spontaneously and expresses within itself the entire universe. The soul is one example, as are all existing substances, of a monad. The universe is populated with these monads, neither having nor needing communication with one another, acting in a "pre-established harmony." Because the soul is a microcosm of

the universe, any external change in the universe is felt in the soul, and either diminishes or increases it.

Leibniz's influence on the Transcendentalists is oblique and yet important. Emerson appreciated his "nobility of method," but it was Hegel, who took on the major tenets of Leibniz's philosophy, who more directly influenced Emerson. Goethe, another major influence on Emerson, adopted Leibniz's concept of the monad and applied it to the indestructible core of identity with which nature has endowed each human. The St. Louis Hegelians, such as William Torrey Harris, as well as others of the "Hegelian Left," turned to Leibniz for their ideas. Leibniz's view of the soul as a monad which possesses the entire universe within itself may be considered a source for Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul. Emerson's insistence on traditional Christian morality (as evidenced by his treatment of Kant) in the face of British empiricism finds justification in Leibniz. Emerson's epistemology also suggests points of correspondence with Leibniz, for Leibniz's understanding that the one thing not first in the senses is the mind itself is utilized by Emerson in his concept of "surprise."

The definitive edition of Leibniz's work, in seven series, was begun in 1923 and is now carried on by the Akademie der Wissenschaften. Less than ten percent of Leibniz's manuscripts exists in any printed edition. The best English edition of his work is *Philosophical Letters and Papers*, translated, edited, and introduced by Leroy E. Loemker (1956). *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings*, translated with an introduction and notes by Robert Latta (1898) is dated, but is still a strong source. A fine short work on the man and his system is Nicholas Rescher's *Leibniz: An Introduction To His Philosophy* (1986). David Van Leer's *Emerson's Epistemology: The Argument of the Essays* (1986) is an exhaustive, impressive study, and makes explicit the debt Emerson owes to Leibniz. Gustaaf Van Cromphout's *Emerson's Modernity and the Example of Goethe* (1990) notes the filtering of Leibniz's thought to Emerson through Goethe.