

**Nico De Federicis**

## **Liberty and Identity A Scaravelli's Interpretation of Leibniz\***

**L. Scaravelli:** 'Critica del Capire', a cura di Mario Corsi [Critique of Understanding, ed. by M. Corsi]. Firenze: La Nuova Italia 1968<sup>2</sup>.

**L. Scaravelli:** 'Lezioni su Leibniz (1953-54)', a cura di G. Brazzini [Lectures on Leibniz, ed. by G. Brazzini]. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino 2000.

A new volume of the Luigi Scaravelli's Writings has recently been published, improving the knowledge of the work of the Italian philosopher. Scaravelli's evaluation started up with a new edition of *Critique of Understanding*<sup>1</sup> in 1968, the essay collection *Judgement and Syllogism in Kant and Hegel* (1976) and the publication of his letters in the volume *Letters to a Florentine's friend*<sup>2</sup> (1983), which were all promoted by Mario Corsi, a former Scaravelli's pupil. Under the scientific direction of Corsi [three other volumes](#) have recently enriched the edition of the *Writings*.

*Lectures on Leibniz* publishes a series of lectures, edited by G. Brazzini, that were held by Luigi Scaravelli at the University of Pisa in the Academic year 1953-54. Scaravelli was a major ill-starred Italian scholar. Although probably the most eminent philosopher in Italy after the death of Benedetto Croce, he nevertheless remained quite unknown. He was one of the most brilliant interpreters of Croce, continuing the neo-idealistic tradition in the second half of the century. This collection of lectures, as emphasized by Gianfranco Brazzini in the editor's preface, offers an exceptional opportunity for insight into Scaravelli's philosophical approach. The *Lectures* were held subsequently to his 1952-53 course on Kant's metaphysical and transcendental deduction in the first and second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), and heralded Scaravelli's last course, on Hegel's early writing on Love, which would be held in 1955-56.

Critically following the idealism of Croce and Gentile, Scaravelli's philosophical interest was mainly oriented toward Logic and Metaphysics, with considerable attention to the relation of these disciplines with science (he also started the studies in Mathematics with Ulisse Dini\*\*, and was a close acquaintance of Pauli, who once asked him to chair a session of an International Congress of Physics). His most outstanding work, *Critique of Understanding*, firstly appeared in 1942. Scaravelli's thought focused primarily on the endeavour to clarify theoretical issues embodying such problems as identity, distinction, the theory of Judgement, liberty and analysis. This wide range of topics is fully represented in *Lectures on Leibniz*, which analyses the philosophy of Leibniz by subdividing it into four sections, reflecting the author's speculative point of view. Thus Scaravellian writing is primarily philosophical and was conceived originally as an authorial dialogue with the great classics in the history of philosophy.

Scaravelli's work is structured into two parts. The first studies the physical theory of Descartes, to which a single extensive chapter is devoted, while the second focuses on the Leibniz's philosophy, subdivided into three chapters entitled *Physics, Logic and Metaphysics*. The first part starts out from Descartes' modern philosophical revolution based on a conception of the space as discrete quantum. Leibniz sought to revise such a conception by developing his own physical theory, introducing the idea of continuity (*lex continui*) that allows reduction of space and movement to force<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, Leibniz states the dissolution of the theoretical necessity of space, shifting from physical to metaphysical knowledge. Scaravelli emphasises the role played by Physics within the Leibnizian system of philosophy. Enquiry into the nature of space and movement brings the problem of infinitesimal calculus to the fore, which Leibniz addresses by formulating a conception of the 'simple' basically as an elementary unit. A simple element is a metaphysical 'substance', which becomes an issue of logical investigation. The main idea underlying Scaravelli's interpretation involves a transition from reality into the metaphysical dimension, which is accomplished by discarding the ontological character of space, time and movement, and reducing these concepts to the idea of *conatus*<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, as in the case of irrational numbers in Mathematics, Leibniz finds force in the mind, which is radically different from *res extensa*: it is quite the opposite. On this basis, Scaravelli maintains that Leibniz has brought about a radical transformation of Physics into Psychology. Thus the idea of force becomes one of the two modes of metaphysical substance, whereas the other remains that of consciousness<sup>5</sup>. The enquiry into the principles of Physics undertaken by Leibniz leads the reader to an understanding of substance that explains the nature of simple elements. Such a substance is the essence that Logic studies as its own subject.

The Scaravellian critique of Leibnizian Logic follows his interpretation of the history of the principle of identity through the history of philosophy, starting from Plato's Sophist and extending to Hegel's *Science of Logic*<sup>6</sup>. Leibniz studied the construction of modal Logic starting from the early *Ars combinatoria* (1666), continuing up to his late work *Theodicy* (published 1710), examining the links of substance with identity (*principium individuationis*). Following the logical theory put forward in 1666, the notion of subjectivity was heavily stressed by the German philosopher, who studied the nature of simple elements on the one hand, and their internal relations on the other. Therefore, according to Leibniz's theory, relation (*relatio*) becomes the main category of Logic. The same idea was advanced in 1669 (in a Letter to Ch. Thomasius) in the sphere of Mathematics and Physics, in the wake of the scientific revolution that Descartes and Galilei and later Newton wrought in natural science<sup>7</sup>. Scaravelli, however, argues that Leibniz totally failed in his endeavour to formulate a combinatorial Logic since it was impossible to discover the basic elements with the tools of Mathematics<sup>8</sup>. As was the case with Physics, Logic leads into Metaphysics. According to Leibnizian thought, simple elements are subjects as individuals: it is this that allows them to be explained in terms of the identity principle and submitted to analytical knowledge. Substance (*quidditas*) and *modi* are the two ways in which traditional Metaphysics understood the concept of being. Within Leibnizian combinatorial Logic, however, it is impossible to discover the basic elements of definition, on account of an explicit methodological fallacy<sup>9</sup>.

The theoretical relevance of the *lex continui* highlights the main character underlying the Scaravellian critique of Leibniz's Logic. For the Italian philosopher, Leibniz was the first author to establish a close link between Logic and Metaphysics, asserting that since Logic constitutes objects, there is no difference at all between reality and thought<sup>10</sup>. Following the Aristotelian tradition, up to the age of Leibniz Logic had been a pure methodology for proper reasoning; subsequently, Leibnizian philosophy became a specific method of philosophical science. A similar development would later take place with the Logic of Kant and Hegel. In harmony with suggestions put forward by the eminent thinker Bertrand Russell, a contemporary of Scaravelli, the Italian scholar considers Leibniz a major reformer in the field of Logic, but his evaluation of this aspect is different from that offered by Russell. Scaravelli remains within the idealistic tradition, approaching all questions of Logic in discussion within the theories of Descartes, Kant, Hegel and Croce. He thus espouses the Crocean view that Logic is a doctrine of the predicate, which is opposed to the theory of the subject. Scaravelli terms the process towards the transformation of Logic from analytical to 'relational' and synthetic a "dissolution of the subject through modernity", the consequence of which has been the abrogation of Metaphysics<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, Scaravelli contends that in the theory of *De arte combinatoria* Leibniz maintained two different definitions of substance: the traditional nominal and the new relational. Only by preserving the traditional idea of substance was it possible for him to build up a monadistic Metaphysics. Therefore, the conception of a *quidditas* at the basis of the relations between predicates expresses the

essential character of Leibnizian *Monadology*. Scaravelli points that all these solutions derive from the law of continuity.

This idea of a common ground for Logic and Metaphysics is expressed by the theory of substance that maintains a dual character. The *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) and the *Theodicy* essay are both works in which "the query concerning individual substance once more refers to the concept of liberty"<sup>12</sup>. Scaravelli emphasises the Leibnizian critique of mechanistic and necessitarian philosophy espoused by Descartes and Spinoza<sup>13</sup>. In contrast to Cartesian rationalism, which turns into a theory of indifference between freedom and necessity, as was also the case in Spinoza's philosophy, Leibniz believes that Metaphysics embodies the idea of freedom of will<sup>14</sup>. The idea of freedom explains the nature of the principle of sufficient reason, according to which God chooses the best possibility and creates the world. In the *Theodicy* Leibniz comments on the fable *De libero arbitrio* by the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, adapting the freedom of the human will to God's providence. The author makes it clear that the construction of possibility as counterfactuality is required in order to understand the specific character of 'necessity' assigned to reality. The necessity of reality is different from that of the truth of reason: it comes from the *reddendae rationis* principle, which is not founded on rationality and identity, but on a free option, according to an idea of that which is good<sup>15</sup>. In this case, freedom becomes the very character of reality. Nevertheless, God's project has a proper providential end: thus, according to the ideas contained in the *Theodicy* the liberty of individuals must be combined with the necessity of God's choice. Despite his attempt, Leibniz failed to truly rescue human liberty from the necessity of providence<sup>16</sup>. As was the case with Logic, Leibnizian Metaphysics falls into contradiction.

According to the Scaravellian interpretation, the continuing presence of the above problems demonstrates that the synthetic structure of substance implies a new logical principle, different from identity, and capable of explaining the links between subject and objects as well as connections among objects. Scaravelli believes that such a principle is represented by the opposition between contrariness and contradiction<sup>17</sup>. Thus identity explains the truth of reason, while contrariness explains possibility and the truth of fact<sup>18</sup>. In Scaravelli's eyes, the Leibniz's entire philosophy seeks to demonstrate that substance and its metaphysical extension, namely the monad, are different from traditional essentiality. They are a principle of free action, providing a ground for production and realisation<sup>19</sup>. In this manner, Leibniz endeavours to offer an answer to the Cartesian query concerning determinism and the mechanism of reality, in favour of notions such as will and liberty. Scaravelli remarks that an appeal to the principle of sufficient reason amounts to establishing Metaphysics on Aesthetics: God's choice has focused only on concepts such as beauty and the good; they maintain reality in coherence<sup>20</sup>.

In the author's mind, choosing only on the basis of the moral best represents an escape from philosophy, since ontology borders on an extra-logical point of view. Scaravelli was well aware that in Leibniz's case the history of the synthetic principle was only at its beginning. He thus argues that this idea of synthesis was inherited by Kant, who used it as the basis for development of the logical problem of Judgement. Later the same idea influenced the Hegelian notion of difference<sup>21</sup>. Following Hegelian Logic, in the twentieth century Croce took another step forward, by reformulating the principles of difference and distinction. Croce separated Aesthetics from Logic in the concept of the theoretical Spirit, placing the subject within the former, and entirely reducing the latter to the structure of predicates. In the Crocean version, Logic is thus turned into a "predicative function", and the metaphysical idea of substance is eliminated. Such an idea bears a strong similarity to contemporary theories on mathematical Logic, in the sense of the logical revolution ushered in by Russell at the beginning of the century. In the approach of Italian neo-idealism, history replaces substance; therefore Logic is taken not only as formal, but as a genuine production of concreteness. With Croce, the legacy of Hegel survived. On this basis, Logic and Aesthetics maintain the structure of opposition within their proper spheres, which are both contained within the theoretical Spirit. Scaravelli points out, however, that the goal of synthesis eluded the Italian philosopher, because of his failure to deal with individual Judgement. The critique that Scaravelli levels against the Crocean Logic implies that philosophical historicism collapses when faced with subject-object synthesis through concrete historical life.

In the final part of his work Scaravelli explains the breakdown of Leibnizian philosophy as due to the intrusion of contradiction into the system of philosophy. In the last chapter of *Critique of Understanding*, Scaravelli discusses the failure of Metaphysics in theorising

opposition. He points out that the history of philosophy has endeavoured to solve the problem of opposition by using analytical methodology, namely by attempting to restore identity in a separate and contradictory world. Scaravelli uses the term 'rationality' to refer to the idea of activity and strength designed to produce identity<sup>22</sup>. But overall, analytical proceedings have failed and contradiction has endured. Aristotle resorted to the axiomatic principle to explain identity, thereby sidestepping the issue<sup>23</sup>. A further chance was offered by Kantian synthetic proceedings, which Leibniz anticipated. Despite the transcendental revolution, Logic was unable to provide a definitive solution to the problem of identity, which combined Hegel's concept of Spirit and its reformulation as put forward by Croce's philosophical reflections. Croce's failure kindled in Scaravelli the conviction that the nature of the relation linking distinction and contradiction to identity was in effect conflictual. The author's conclusion was that western philosophy entirely failed to comprehend the basic character of identity: Scaravelli thus conceptualised contradiction as the force whose onslaught that tends to translate into irrationality. In the editor's words, the extreme critique of analytical proceedings produces a new type of formulation for liberty, which is finally reduced to the bare power of blind instinct coexisting with the rational impulse in human beings<sup>24</sup>.

The same dissolution comes to the fore once more in the Leibnizian fallacy involving analytical rationality. Scaravelli discerns the form of contradiction within the three logical sorts of necessity, possibility and reality. He defines as contradictory the logical structure of the truth of reason, on account of the need to postulate irrational numbers in order to respect the law of continuity. As in the case of the truth of reason, contradiction comes back to possibility and truth of fact. The possible worlds have to maintain identity besides the principle of sufficient reason, which selects among different possibilities. Nevertheless, if the choice of God is oriented to the good, it is incomprehensible why, whenever all worlds are coherent - i.e. identical with themselves - they must be 'impossible' and different - i.e. contrasting with each other<sup>25</sup>. The consequence is that the principle of sufficient reason makes the world irrational. In the case of the truth of fact, Scaravelli again focuses on the main thesis of the *Dialogue effectif*, which explains the basis of evil through the finiteness of human nature. Leibniz considers both evil and irrational numbers a consequence of limitation in essence, referring to the issue of nothingness. As has been known since Plato, Agustin and Descartes, nothingness expresses the very nature of contradiction<sup>26</sup>; thus, with the Scaravellian interpretation the entire Leibnizian metaphysical construction loses significance when confronted with the *débâcle* of the sufficient reason principle. Scaravelli strongly recommended the primacy of questioning in philosophy. Raising questions and seeking to argue means applying reason in order to enlighten the blindness of Plato's world of shadows. Critical comprehension - this is the meaning of walking along the path of understanding. In the author's own words, understanding implies invention and transformation of reality, which also signifies placing the present within mere possibility<sup>27</sup>.

\* I develop here a review of *Lectures on Leibniz*, which will appear on the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*.

\*\* I thank prof. Brazzini, who after the publication of this review article has let me know some interesting biographical information about the author. Scaravelli enrolled the Faculty of Mathematics at the University of Pisa, which abandoned after a year in favour of the Faculty of Medicine. When he was quite close to obtain a degree, he abandoned the Medical studies switching to Philosophy, in which he graduated at the age of 29 years.

## Note

1 L. SCARAVELLI, *Critica del capire*, ed. by M. Corsi [=CC] (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1968<sup>2</sup>).

2 ID., *Giudizio e sillogismo in Kant e Hegel*, ed. by M. Corsi (Roma: Cadmo, 1976); ID., *Lettere a un amico fiorentino*, ed. by M. Corsi (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1983. Napoli: Guida, 1987<sup>2</sup>).

3 ID., *Lezioni su Leibniz*, ed. by G. Brazzini [=LL] (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2000), p.

95.

[4](#) Ibid., p. 123.

[5](#) Ibid., p. 128.

[6](#) CC, pp. 48-9, p. 52.

[7](#) LL, p. 83, p. 95, p. 141.

[8](#) Ibid., pp. 157-8.

[9](#) Ibid., p. 155, p. 160.

[10](#) Ibid., p. 170.

[11](#) Ibid., p. 139.

[12](#) Ibid., p. 193.

[13](#) CC, p. 74, p. 85, pp. 133-4, p. 137 *passim* .

[14](#) LL., p. 183.

[15](#) Ibid., p. 157, pp. 210-2.

[16](#) Ibid., pp. 232-3.

[17](#) Ibid., pp. 174-5. CC, pp. 152-3.

[18](#) LL, pp. 176-8.

[19](#) Ibid., p. 167, p. 215.

[20](#) Ibid., p. 219.

[21](#) Ibid., pp. 227-9. CC, pp. 86-7.

[22](#) LL, p. 32. CC, p. 116.

[23](#) Ibid., p. 51.

[24](#) LL, p. 35. CC, pp. 116-7.

[25](#) LL, pp. 245-6. CC, pp. 55-8.

[26](#) LL, pp. 247-8.

[27](#) CC, pp. 194-6.

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