



The secret machine

Description

There are at least three touch points connecting the Baroque mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) with secretiveness.

1. A cryptographic machine

Leibniz invented and built a mechanical calculator. But less well known is his unbuilt model of a machine for encrypting and decrypting messages, using the [poylaphabetical](#) encryption method. In his account of Leibniz's machines, the philosopher Nicholas Rescher states:

the calculating machine performs mind-like processes in relation to reasoning, and the cipher machine performs mind-like processes in relation to communication (113).

So, Leibniz aimed to demonstrate by his mechanical inventiveness the two key functions of human cognition as he saw them: **calculation** and **communication**.

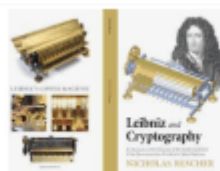
Leibniz pitched the cryptographic machine to the emperor, who failed to provide support for the manufacture of a prototype. As Leibniz thought the device was only for princes according to Rescher, this apparatus was Leibniz's most closely guarded secret (110). It was never built, though others (e.g. Nicholas Rescher) have since attempted to replicate it.



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2. Secret society

Much of what we know about Leibniz's life comes from his first biographer Johann Georg von Eckhart (1664-1730). Around the age of 20, Leibniz spent a year as the secretary of a secret society of alchemists. An article by George Ross probes the claims and counter claims of Leibniz's commitment to alchemy. Ross provides an excerpt from Eckhart, delivering a tip on how to con your way into a [secret society](#).

Now, since he [Leibniz] was curious about everything, he was very keen to have some practice in chemistry as well ; so he considered all the various ways of getting access to these secrets. The director of the society was a priest. So he devised the following trick, as he himself often told me with a laugh. He got hold of some very difficult books on chemistry, and noted down the obscurest phraseology he could find in them. Out of these he composed a letter to the priest, which even he himself did not understand, and in it he also requested admission to the secret society. On reading the letter, the priest came to the conclusion that the young Leibniz must be a true adept, and not only gave him access to the laboratory, but asked him to become their assistant and secretary. (223).

Ross is keen to dispel any notion that alchemical mystery cultism had significant impact on Leibniz's mature philosophy, apart from demonstrating his ambition and opportunism. I'm prepared to see this episode as evidence of a philosopher's [curiosity](#). Curiosity draws people to secrets, and even to promote and exploit them.

3. Windowless monads

Leibniz famously defined, or redefined the concept of the monad. I can't say I've ever felt the concept important or compelling enough to engage with it. According to the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#),

The ultimate expression of Leibniz's view comes in his celebrated theory of monads, in which the only beings that will count as genuine substances and hence be considered real are mind-like simple substances endowed with perception and appetite.

In other words, the world is made up of perceptual units. According to Leibniz's philosophical idealism, monads are the only things that are *real*. Monads are also indivisible. Amongst the definitions he provides in the essay *Monadology*, Leibniz asserts

The Monads have no windows, through which anything could come in or go out. (7).

Leibniz's *Monadology* is of interest, especially as inflected through the writing of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for whom the term **monadology** invokes the notion of **nomadology**, the study of how sedentary power is permeated by itinerants as if from the outside. The simple formulation of the windowless monad operates at least as a provocative metaphor for something that I don't entirely understand, but is apparently important.

See [previous post](#) alluding to *The Fold*. Through its explanation in terms of spaces and windows, nomadology brings Leibniz's philosophy further into the orbit of architecture and secret places, such

as [crypts](#).

References

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Note

- Banner image is a museum display taken in 2012 in the Town Hall of Leipzig, the town in which Leibniz was born.

Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. cryptography
2. Deleuze
3. Leibniz

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