

Kant's Alleged Ambiguity Toward Leibniz: Revisiting the Critique of Dogmatism¹

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.105535>

Received: 30-10-2025 • Accepted: 16-12-2025

ENG Abstract: This paper discusses Kant's critique of Leibniz, especially in the *Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection* in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Although Kant's early criticism suggests an identification of Leibniz with Wolffian dogmatism, later texts reveal a more nuanced attitude, distinguishing between Leibniz's own metaphysics and its early reception. Examining the four central pairs of concepts of reflection—identity/diversity, agreement/opposition, inner/outer, and matter/form, this article shows that what Kant primarily criticizes is a form of Leibnizianism popularized through Wolff, rather than Leibniz himself. Drawing on Leibniz's writings, it is shown that the alleged ambiguity in Kant's position toward Leibniz reflects a certain development in his thought: namely, a movement from critique toward partial retrieval. This study is relevant not only to the question of Leibniz's reception in the eighteenth century, but also to understanding Kant's relationship to the rationalist tradition, which he sought both to overcome and to preserve.

Keywords: Kant; Leibniz; Wolff; Amphiboly; Critique of Pure Reason

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How to cite: Gutiérrez-García, J.A. (2026). Kant's Alleged Ambiguity Toward Leibniz: Revisiting the Critique of Dogmatism in *Con-Textos Kantianos*. *International Journal of Philosophy*, 23, 107-116. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.105535>

1. Kantian reception of Leibnizianism

Understanding Kant's interpretation of Leibniz requires first clarifying what is meant by Leibnizianism. Leibniz was a highly productive thinker² whose work has given rise to multiple and often divergent interpretations since the earliest commentators.³ Such variation is unsurprising considering the historically layered development of Leibniz's thought. In the case of Leibniz, this development has been far from linear.⁴ From Wolff onwards, Leibniz came to be regarded as one of the principal sources of what became known as 'Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy'—a project initiated by Wolff himself with the aim of establishing a distinctively German philosophy at the beginning of the eighteenth century. We may ask, however, how appropriate this designation is. Despite the coinage of the term,⁵ it is difficult to draw a straightforward identification between Leibniz's position and that of Wolff, given significant differences in their respective understanding of certain key philosophical principles (see note 4), particularly the principle of sufficient reason.

Although both thinkers regarded the PSR as a foundational principle, Wolff conceived it primarily as the law that explains phenomena—that is, as a causal principle. Leibniz, by contrast, understood this principle in a

¹ Este trabajo ha sido posible gracias a la financiación del Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades: contratos para la Formación del Profesorado Universitario (FPU Ley 14/2011); y Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades y FEDER, UE: Proyecto del Plan Nacional PID2022-142190NB-I00.

² However, this was not the main interpretation for his immediate contemporaries; the early eighteenth-century reception of Leibnizian works was marked by significant discontinuities, to the extent that some of these contemporaries regarded him as an unproductive thinker (cf. Gädeke 2017, p. 132).

³ The Wolffian approach was not the only attempt to engage with Leibniz's thought; in fact, this interpretation was the target of remarkable criticism from later figures such as Crusius, Baumgarten, and Kant himself (cf. Perin 2015). However, from the very beginning of the eighteenth century, some authors, like Hansch and Bilfinger, tried to read Leibniz from a non-Wolffian perspective (see Lorenz 2016; Wilson 1994, p. 453).

⁴ In another work I address this topic in relation to the complexity found in the Leibnizian approach to principles such as the principle of sufficient reason (cf. Gutiérrez-García 2025).

⁵ The coinage of this characterization is attributed mainly to Bilfinger and Feuerlein (see Wilson 1994, p. 453; Fichant 2017, p. 24).

more complex manner: for him, the *PSR* not only accounts as a causal principle, but also functions as an ontological condition of intelligibility—that is, an axiom. These two functions are often interwoven in Leibniz's writings, yet they are not explicitly distinguished. Wolff's interpretation, by contrast, overlooks this functional complexity of the principle. Seeking to justify the principle from a deductive standpoint, he flattens its ontological dimension. This issue is clearly illustrated by the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence and in Wolff's later interpretation of it (cf. Gutiérrez-García 2025, pp. 596–600).

This background results in Wolff's equivocal use of the concept of 'reason' or 'ground' (*Grund*), conflating physical causes with the conditions of intelligibility of reality. The result is a form of rationalism that would later be criticized by Crusius and Kant as dogmatic.⁶ Accordingly, equating Leibniz's position with Wolff's would first require clarifying in what sense the *PSR* and related principles are being understood. Without recognizing Leibniz's dual use of the *PSR* and his subtle treatment of metaphysical foundations, any alignment with Wolff's metaphysics risks misrepresenting the complexity of Leibniz's philosophical outlook. In this regard, it is well worth noting that neither did Leibniz consider Wolff his disciple, nor did Wolff regard himself Leibniz's (cf. Wilson 1994, p. 445).

This clarification is particularly important considering what happened next, which is well-known in the literature: after the previous critical attempts made by Crusius (see Perin 2015, pp. 521–523), Kant started a quarrel not only against Wolff—as Crusius did, but the whole 'dogmatical philosophy', which was mainly represented by Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. Leibniz is, without a shadow of a doubt, one of the central concerns of Kant's critical works.⁷ Yet it remains to be determined whether Kant regarded Leibnizian philosophy as something to be avoided or as an ideal to be realized. In Kant's critical philosophy, 'dogmatism' refers primarily to the attempt to know things in themselves by means of pure concepts of the understanding.⁸ There are at least three different stages in Kant's critical position toward dogmatism: his pre-critical writings—notably the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770; the critical position developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—especially in the sections on the Amphiboly Of The Concepts of Reflexion and the Paralogisms; and his later works—from 1786 onwards—in which Kant explicitly addresses the issue of dogmatism and certain Leibnizian theses, such as the *Progress of Metaphysics Since Leibniz and Wolff*, the *Lectures on Metaphysics*, and the *Eberhard Controversy*.⁹

Despite this general criticism, it is noteworthy that Kant's attitude toward Leibniz becomes more nuanced beginning around 1786. In these later works, Kant increasingly distinguishes between a misunderstood Leibniz—distorted by his successors—and Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy itself. However, one might object that such a development is not clearly reflected in the revisions introduced in the B-edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this regard, it is important to take into account that, at the level of the textual evolution of the *Critique* itself, the changes introduced in the second edition are quite selective in scope and largely motivated by specific systematic and polemical concerns¹⁰, many of them arising from Kant's response to early misunderstandings of the first edition, rather than by an attempt at a comprehensive revision of his earlier assessments.¹¹ Moreover, with regard to the Amphiboly in particular, its core concern—the critique of dogmatism—remains in place regardless of whether Leibniz himself, or rather the doctrinal interpretation of Leibniz developed by his early heirs, is taken as the primary target of the critique.¹² In this sense, I believe that the systematic function of the Amphiboly is preserved, which may explain the absence of significant changes in the second edition. Although some nuanced indications of this shift in Kant's attitude can already be found in texts dating from 1786 (see Ak IV, 507), it is nevertheless true that Kant's later writings, from 1788 onward, invite a more differentiated and explicit historical assessment of Leibniz's own metaphysics. In the *Eberhard Controversy*, Kant even suggests that the *Critique of Pure Reason* might be regarded as 'Leibniz's true apologia', insofar as it corrects the misinterpretations of both his supporters and detractors (cf. Jauernig 2008, pp. 48–49; Allison 2001; Sánchez-Rodríguez 2017): "The *Critique of Pure Reason* can thus be regarded as Leibniz's true apologia, even in the face of his supporters, whose eulogies do him any honor" (Ak VIII, 251). The

⁶ Crusius' critique from 1743 draws attention to an ambiguity in the use of the *PSR* that had been introduced by Wolff (cf. Wilson 1994, p. 459).

⁷ As Jauernig has noted, Leibniz is (after God) one of the most-mentioned individuals in the Kantian corpus (see 2008, pp. 41 and 212).

⁸ To be precise, dogmatism also applies to any procedure that seeks to establish synthetic *a priori* knowledge without first determining how such concepts are schematized—that is, how they are constituted by the conditions of human sensibility (space and time). Even if one restricts knowledge to phenomena, it is still possible to proceed dogmatically if the concepts employed are not mediated by the transcendental schema that links them to a possible experience. For this topic, in relation to the issues discussed in the Third Analogy of Experience, see Gutiérrez-García 2024, pp. 185–188.

⁹ For the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I follow the translation by Guyer and Wood (1998), but references are given according to the Academy edition (A/B). For the other main works cited using abbreviations, an abbreviation list is provided at the beginning of the bibliography.

¹⁰ On the selective character of the revisions introduced in the B-edition, see Guyer and Wood's analysis in the introduction to their edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1998, pp. 66–73).

¹¹ There is sufficient evidence that Kant did not undertake revisions of the B-edition with the aim of retrospectively adapting the text of the first *Critique* to the development of his philosophical views between 1781 and 1787, even with respect to fundamental aspects of his philosophy. A clear example can be found in the incompatibility between Kant's moral theory in the Canon of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the moral writings from the *Groundwork* onward. The moral theory presented in the Canon was based on a rational hope for the attainment of happiness proportionate to moral desert, understood as a subjective ground of action. As Allison has shown, despite the fact that this theory appears eudaimonistic and heteronomous in light of the *Groundwork*, nothing led Kant to suppress or revise these earlier claims in the period 1786–87 (see Allison 2011, pp. 55ff.).

¹² For a detailed and systematic analysis of Kant's critique of dogmatism—particularly in relation to Wolff and the methodological background of critical philosophy—see Gava (2023).

evolution of Kant's critique reflects both a rejection of Wolffian dogmatism and a partial retrieval of Leibniz as a precursor of critical philosophy—what some scholars have called “a Kantian *in nuce* falsified by his followers” (Duque 2011, p. xx). This lack of univocity on Kant's attitude toward Leibnizianism (cf. Fichant 2017, p. 31) is the main issue that motivates this study.

For the purpose of this paper, I will not dwell on the question of how justified is the claim that Kantian philosophy regards Leibniz as a kind of proto-critical thinker. Rather, I will focus on the other side of the claim: to what extent, from Kant's perspective and from Leibniz's own texts, Leibniz aligns with Leibniz-Wolffianism. To that end, I will offer a detailed commentary on the critiques found in the Amphiboly section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant appears to be particularly severe in his assessment of Leibniz.

The aim of this analysis is not so much to demonstrate that Kant is or is not unfair to Leibniz in the Amphiboly, as this point has been extensively addressed in the literature—and Kant himself seems to move in this direction his later writings (see Garber 2008; Parkinson 1981; De Boer 2020; Fichant 2017). Rather, the purpose of this commentary is to shed light, on the basis of Leibniz's own texts, on the complexity of the targeted thesis in that section, and to identify the extent to which Kant's attributions refer more properly to the Wolffian interpretation of Leibniz (cf. Malter 1981). As Jauernig suggests, the position Kant adopts in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is not isolated from his other remarks on Leibniz throughout his works (cf. 2008, p. 48); it is important to highlight both the continuity and the development of these ideas. While Jauernig approaches the issue from the perspective of how Leibnizian theses genuinely relate to Kant's philosophical concerns, my aim is to analyze the philosophical foundations—from Leibniz perspective—of this development, with a focus on the Wolffian interpretation and the issue of dogmatism. I share Jauernig's (2008, 54) and Garber's (2008, p. 67) concern that the Kant who speaks of and criticizes Leibniz did not have access to a corpus of texts that could be properly conceived as ‘the philosophy of Leibniz’. I go further in arguing that no such thing as the philosophy of Leibniz exists; and if it does, it must be understood as a polysemic and exceedingly rich philosophical gesture that resists univocal reconstruction—one that must be examined in all its complexity, both in terms of its legacy and interpretations. Leibnizian philosophy is not to be conceived as the elephant in the room that was buried along with the old furniture at the dawn of the eighteenth century, but rather as the catalyst for a whole series of philosophical developments—both dogmatic and non-dogmatic—whose depth and influence deserve serious consideration.

The main contribution this paper aims to make is to show that the alleged ambiguity in Kant's position—between the critique presented in the Amphiboly and the views found in his later writings—should rather be understood as a process of discovery and acknowledgement through which Kant progressively came to recognize the complexity and richness of Leibnizian thought. While Kant's attitude toward Leibniz certainly evolves over time, this paper does not aim to reconstruct the development in its entirety. Rather, it focuses on a particularly dense moment of Kant's critique—the Amphiboly—as a representative case that reveals the complexity of the reception of Leibnizian ideas in critical philosophy. In addition, this kind of analysis may contribute to clarifying current research on Baumgarten's position—especially given that key aspects of his *Metaphysics* were both rejected by Kant and simultaneously served as a major source for Kant's reception of Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy (cf. Jauernig 2008, p. 50; De Boer 2020, p. 6). As for the structure of this paper, I shall begin by introducing the context and problems addressed in the Amphiboly. I will then examine the different critiques, following the order of the four sections that compose this chapter: Identity and diversity, Agreement and opposition, Inner and outer, and Matter and form.

2. The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflexion: A Critique of Leibniz?

2.1. The context of the Amphiboly

The Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflexion—to which Kant adds in the title: By the Confusion of the Transcendental Use of the Understanding with the Empirical—is a section placed at the end of the Analytic of Principles in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This appendix is devoted to clarifying a certain ambiguity (*Zweitdeutigkeit*) or confusion (*Verwechselung*) between the two uses of the understanding mentioned. This section revolves around two key concepts that are often conflated, partly because Kant does not fully develop the first of them—at least not in this section: namely, ‘use’ and ‘reflection’. The use—both empirical and transcendental—of the understanding is not the same as the reflection—logical and transcendental. The use concerns how we conceive objects of knowledge, whereas reflection concerns the process through which we compare the representations we have of those objects.

The transcendental use has a negative meaning; in the Paralogisms, Kant criticizes empirical psychology for making this kind of use, whereby—in his words—“outer appearances [are taken] as representations that are effected in us by their objects, as things in themselves found outside us” (A372).¹³ The empirical use, by contrast, is the one in which objects are taken as external phenomena (cf. A373), which can only be given under the spatio-temporal form of sensible intuition. However, the reflection does not deal directly with how we conceive objects, as Kant points out at the very beginning of the Amphiboly:

¹³ Transcendental idealism is closely linked to a form of empirical realism (see A491–493/B519–522), namely, the view that objects are not things in themselves but phenomena. By contrast, transcendental realism—which characterises both empirical psychology and dogmatic philosophy more broadly—is connected to empirical idealism: if we take the objects of which we have representations to be things in themselves, which can never be given to us, then we are left only with an idea of them, as is the case in Berkeley's philosophy (cf. B71; B274; Allison 2004, pp. 20–34). The outcome of this form of idealism—empirical idealism—is what Kant refers to as ‘transcendental illusion’ (see note 14).

Reflection (*reflexio*) [...] is rather the state of mind in which we first prepare ourselves to find out the subjective conditions under which we can arrive at concepts. It is the consciousness of the relation of given representations to our various sources of cognition, through which alone their relation among themselves can be correctly determined. (A260/B316)

Thus, transcendental reflection refers to the activity by which we compare different representations with the cognitive faculty to which they belong—either understanding or sensibility (cf. A261/B317). In contrast, logical reflection merely compares these representations without attending to the faculty to which they are referred (cf. A262/B318). The confusion criticized in the Amphiboly arises from the absence of this transcendental reflection, which leaves room for the use of ‘amphibious’ concepts—that is, concepts that seem to apply to phenomena—even though they in fact belong to the understanding. These are the concepts found in dogmatic metaphysics—as Kant characterizes it (see notes 8 and 12). Although these concepts cannot be applied to sensibility—according to transcendental reflection, they are nevertheless used empirically, as if they referred to objects of knowledge.¹⁴

The premise of this thesis is none other than the one Kant had already established in the Transcendental Aesthetic (see B73), and which he reiterates shortly before the Amphiboly; namely, the necessary connection between understanding and sensibility: “With us understanding and sensibility can determine an object only in combination” (A258/B314). The objective validity of our concepts can only be assessed if both faculties are brought into relation (cf. A271/B327), a relation that is impossible unless we have first discerned to which faculty each concept properly belongs. From this framework, Kant proceeds to characterize Leibnizian philosophy as an “intellectual system of the world” (A270/B326), insofar as—due to the mentioned confusion—he sought to apply abstract concepts to the knowledge of things in themselves: “[Leibniz] believed himself able to cognize the inner constitution of things by comparing all objects only with the understanding and the abstract formal concepts of its thinking” (A270/B326). This critique is summarized in the well-known statement: “Leibniz intellectualized the appearances” (A271/B327); that is, he assigned all representations of objects to the understanding. The opposing view—assigning such representations to sensibility—is exemplified by Locke (cf. A271/B327; Fichant 2017, p. 20).

Kant’s critique is structured around four pairs of concepts of reflection, which will also serve as the framework for the subsequent sections of this paper: identity and diversity, agreement and opposition, inner and outer, and finally, matter and form. In each case, Kant targets the following Leibnizian ideas—although, as will be shown, these do not fully correspond to Leibniz’s own formulations: the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, the principle of non-contradiction and the problem of evil, the concept of monad and its representational force—along with a critique of the notion of pre-established harmony and the denial of physical influence between substances, and finally, the idea of the monad as an entity in which matter precedes form.

2.2. Identity and diversity

Kant’s thesis in this section is that Leibniz’s principle of the identity of indiscernibles lacks objective validity—that is, it cannot be applied to the knowledge of objects in the world. This principle is only valid if we take appearances as things in themselves, as “*intelligibilia*, i.e., objects of the pure understanding” (A264/B320; see Willaschek 1998, pp. 347–348). Leibniz formulates this principle as follows: “it is not possible that there be two individuals perfectly alike, or whose difference consists only in number” (GP III, 42). According to Kant, this principle holds only for the concepts of things in general, not for appearances; it functions merely as an analytic rule for conceptual comparison, not as a principle applicable to phenomena—which are always given to us in space and time:

Without further conditions, the difference in place already makes the multiplicity and distinction of objects as appearances not only possible in itself but also necessary. Thus, that putative law is no law of nature. It is simply an analytical rule or comparison of things through mere concepts. (A272/B328)

Nonetheless, it is important to note some fundamental nuances concerning Leibniz’s definition and use of this principle. First, the principle of the identity of indiscernibles is not employed by Leibniz from a purely intellectual standpoint. This is not so much due to a confusion of the sort Kant identifies, but rather because the very function of the principle concerns how we are to understand the difference between identical phenomena—if such phenomena are indeed given to us, not how phenomena must be given. Secondly, spatial difference, i.e., the way in which phenomena are given to us—is already one of the fundamental features Leibniz considers when formulating the principle. This becomes clear upon closer examination of the texts.

The function of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles is to account for appearances; it is rooted in the principle of sufficient reason, whose role is likewise to provide intelligibility to the world. That is to say,

¹⁴ Kant recognises reason’s natural tendency to engage in such unfounded inferences; he defines this as ‘illusory appearance’, namely, a process that consists “in the taking of a subjective condition of thinking for the cognition of an object” (A396). Logical illusion refers to “the mere imitation of the form of reason (the illusion of fallacious inferences)” (B353), and it can be corrected by paying attention to the logical rule and its domain of applicability. Transcendental illusion, by contrast, cannot be eradicated by transcendental critique; it is a natural illusion, through which certain fundamental rules and maxims of reason are taken as objective principles. The example Kant offers is the proposition: “The world must have a beginning in time” (B353). It should be noted, however, that the error found in the Amphiboly does not yet amount to this natural illusion of reason, as Fichant precisely points out (see 2017, p. 20). As Willaschek remarks, this section appears at the end of the *Analytic of Principles* precisely because it addresses avoidable errors—and not yet the natural illusion—that can be identified through reflection on the possibility of knowledge, as developed in the *Analytic* itself (cf. 1998, p. 326).

although the standard Leibnizian formulation of the principle—mentioned above—is that no two beings can differ by number alone, the actual use of the principle is, in a sense, the reverse, and reveals its close connection to the PSR: it is not simply that no indiscernibles exist—which indeed they do not—but rather that, if we perceive two beings as indiscernible, we are obliged, for the sake of attaining effective knowledge of them, to seek the internal reason for their difference—that is, the reason why they are in fact presented to us as two distinct beings. In the *Logical-Metaphysical Principles* (1689)—also known as *First Truths*—Leibniz adds the following corollary to the formulation of the principle of the identity of indiscernibles: “since, in fact, a reason must be given for why they are diverse, this reason must lie in some difference inherent in the things themselves” (AA VI, 4, 1645).

In this formulation from the *Logical-Metaphysical Principles*, the element of spatiality is already present as a fundamental condition for considering the difference between two substances.¹⁵ For Leibniz, substances are always material, and since matter is characterized by its infinite divisibility (cf. GP VI, 618), only an infinite understanding could apprehend all the differences that arise within matter.¹⁶ The ontological possibility that two completely indiscernible beings might be given to us, Leibniz argues, is a purely intellectual assumption: “the perfect similarity of places occurs only in incomplete or abstract notions, when things are not considered in their entirety, but only according to a certain mode of consideration” (AA VI, 4, 1645). That is to say, indiscernibles—in an ontological sense—are merely a supposition arising from a defect in comprehension, or more precisely, from the finitude that characterizes human knowledge (cf. AA VI, 4, 543).

For this reason, as Leibniz states in his correspondence with Clarke (see GP VII, 398), all substances are in fact discernible, even if our way of perceiving them may suggest otherwise. This same exchange includes an interesting argument, which is very remarkable for its originality: against Clarke, Leibniz argues that although it is logically possible to conceive of a world in which the principle of the indiscernibles does not hold—that is, such a world would not be contradictory—this would nonetheless go against the ‘general order of things’ (cf. Jorati 2017, p. 911; GP VII, 393–394).¹⁷ This order refers to how metaphysics should be understood: it is also in this correspondence that Leibniz affirms that principles such as the identity of indiscernibles and the principle of sufficient reason “change the state of metaphysics, which by means of them becomes real and demonstrative, whereas before it consisted only of empty terms” (GP VII, 372). If philosophy is to avoid falling into empty terms—which closely resemble the kind of error Kant identifies in the Amphiboly, then the principle of the identity of indiscernibles must be understood as a merely logical possibility, i.e., an intellectual condition we apply in our effort to grasp the specific difference in substances.

However, this understanding of the principle—as a condition of intelligibility—does not seem to be shared by Clarke, or even by Wolff. For them, principles such as these must be justified by reference—or reduced—to other principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction. For Leibniz, by contrast, their justification lies precisely in the fact that it is through these principles that we are able to attain effective knowledge of things (cf. Gutiérrez-García 2025, pp. 594–597). For Clarke and Wolff, both principles—the identity of indiscernibles and the principle of sufficient reason—explain how appearances are constituted in the world, rather than functioning as intellectual necessary conditions for apprehending such appearances as distinct.

2.3. Agreement and opposition

In this section, Kant focuses on criticizing Leibniz’s principle of non-contradiction and its scope of application, as well as the possible implications that follow from it. Along with the principle of sufficient reason, the principle of non-contradiction stands as one of the fundamental keystones of Leibnizian philosophy. According to this principle, “we judge false that which contains contradiction, and true that which is opposed or contradictory to false” (GP VI, 612). This principle delimits the epistemological domain of truths of reason—those whose negation implies a contradiction; and these, in turn, define the realm of the possible, which for Leibniz is also the realm of the real (cf. C, 17–18). In this way, the real is defined—for Leibniz—from a logical perspective, that is, as the absence of opposition or contradiction. This is precisely the idea Kant sets out to criticize:

The principle that realities (as mere affirmations) never logically oppose each other is an entirely true proposition about the relation of concepts, but signifies nothing at all either in regard to nature nor overall in regard to anything in itself (of this we have no concept). (A272–273/B328–329)

If we think of reality as phenomenon, mutual opposition or reciprocal destruction (*Abbruch*) occurs constantly in the interactions of nature (cf. A273–274/B329–330), “like two moving forces in the same straight line that either push or pull a point in opposed directions, or also like an enjoyment that balances the scale against a pain” (A265/B321). However, if we apply the proposition—the principle that realities, as mere

¹⁵ The point of disagreement lies, rather, in how each author understands spatial determinations. For Kant, spatial—and temporal—determinations constitute the transcendental conditions of sensible intuition (cf. A111). Leibniz, by contrast, is not yet at this point: for him, spatio-temporal determinations are actual determinations of objects—they are properties, relations. However, Leibniz understands these relations as ‘intrinsic denominations’, that is, as predicates that inhere in the concept of each individual (cf. F, 112; Mugnai 2001). That said, to affirm that these determinations do not occur as extrinsic relations is not to affirm that they do not occur at all, as will be discussed below (see 2.4. Inner and outer).

¹⁶ The foundation of substantiality, Leibniz argues, lies in the monad—the Aristotelian substantial form—since matter is characterised by its lack of unity (cf. GP IV, 478). However, this form cannot be understood in isolation, without a body. As Leibniz claims in his correspondence with Arnauld, there is always a continuity solution between soul and body (cf. F, 184).

¹⁷ This concept is particularly relevant for understanding the argument developed by Leibniz in the *New Essays* concerning the problem of personal identity (see AA VI, 6, 230–247).

affirmations, never logically oppose one another—to phenomena, we fall into a confusion whereby we ascribe to appearances something that belongs only to concepts of understanding. As a result, “all ills are nothing but consequences of the limits of created beings, i.e., negations, since these are the only opposing things in reality” (A273/B329). Kant acknowledges that this is not something Leibniz himself asserts, but rather a proposition adopted by the Leibnizian-Wolffians: “Although Herr von Leibniz did not exactly announce this proposition with the pomp of a new principle, he nevertheless used it for new assertions, and his successors expressly incorporated it into their Leibnizian-Wolffian doctrine” (A273/B329). This formulation is slightly ambiguous: although Kant attributes the statement to Leibniz’s followers, he also acknowledges its frequent association with Leibniz himself, suggesting a partial conflation that will persist throughout the Amphiboly. However, it is quite significant that, already at this point, we find a precedent for Kant’s later distinction between Leibniz and the Leibnizian-Wolffian authors. Let us now examine in more detail why Leibniz himself does not fall into this confusion, while his followers do.

As Kant points out, the scope of application of the principle of non-contradiction lies in the domain of logic, of concepts. This is something Leibniz himself acknowledges. However, a key distinction must be drawn in Leibniz’s philosophy between what is real and what is existent. As mentioned above, the real corresponds to what is logically possible and is defined through necessary truths—those whose denial implies a contradiction. By contrast, the existent refers to what is actualized in the world through divine choice (see AA VI, 4, 1560–1561; GP VI, 128). As Leibniz explains in the *Discourse of Metaphysics* (1686), truths of reason may be absolutely necessary, but the actual existence of this world is hypothetically necessary, since it depends on God’s will to choose this world rather than another (cf. AA VI, 4, 1546–1547). By highlighting this distinction, Leibniz conceives of the world’s intelligibility without collapsing possibility into actuality. In the domain of the existent and material, opposition arises through an infinite gradation of changes and inequalities. In all states of matter in which no opposition appears to be present, there nonetheless lies an infinitesimal opposition—a kind of ‘evanescent’ differentiation. Leibniz illustrates this in the second part of his *Specimen Dynamicum* (1695), when discussing motion—which is nothing but a relation with respect to phenomena—and the law of continuity:

In accordance with this Law of Continuity, which excludes any leap in change, it coherently follows that rest may be regarded as a special case of motion—evidently an evanescent or minimal motion—and that equality may be regarded as an evanescent inequality. (GM VI, 249)

For Leibniz, the metaphysical and logical dimension of substantiality¹⁸ is linked to the material dimension of phenomena, but it is not identical to it. Otherwise, it would not be possible to speak of opposition, change, or motion within a world that is non-contradictory. That is, in a world that is not logically contradictory, opposition and change can only be understood if they are not taken in a logical sense, but rather in a phenomenal—or ontological—one. On the phenomenal and physical level, reciprocal opposition and inequality among realities take place by means of infinitesimal differences, which Leibniz calls evanescent. However, this distinction does not seem to be as clearly maintained in some early interpretations of Leibniz—most notably that of Wolff.¹⁹ As Kant points out, the conception of contradiction as the only possible form of opposition—presented there as ‘a new principle’—corresponds more to the presumed heirs of Leibnizianism than to Leibniz himself (cf. A273/B329).

2.4. Inner and outer

The Leibnizian theses under critique in this section include the concept of the monad and several of its underlying ideas: its representational capacity, the pre-established harmony between soul and body, and the rejection of physical interaction between substances. As Leibniz puts it, “the notion of an individual substance, or of a complete being, is nothing other than a sufficiently complete notion from which everything that can be attributed to the subject may be deduced” (F, 112; see note 18). This is the principle of inhesion, which Leibniz employs to formulate his definition of complete notion. This complete notion constitutes the substantial form or monad, as Leibniz states in *De Ipsa Natura*:

It is this substantial principle itself which is called *soul* in living beings and *substantial form* in other beings, and inasmuch as it truly constitutes one substance with matter, or a unit in itself, it makes up what I call a monad. (GP IV, 511)

¹⁸ This dimension is that of the ‘complete notion’—that is, the totality of predicates that constitute an individual. This set of predicates is distinguished by Leibniz from the individual substance itself, as he explains to Arnauld in relation to the confused knowledge we have about our notion: “It would be necessary to conceive clearly what distinguishes me from all other spirits, yet I have only a confused experience of it. [...] When one consults the confused experience one has of one’s own individual notion in particular, one fails to notice the connection of events; but when one considers the general and distinct notions that enter into it, one finds it. Indeed, in consulting the notion I have of any true proposition, I find that every predicate—whether necessary or contingent, past, present, or future—is contained in the notion of the subject” (F, 100).

¹⁹ Wolff’s attempt to demonstrate the principle of sufficient reason from the principle of non-contradiction rests on this equivocal use of terms like ‘real’ and ‘existent’. By means of this confusion, he employs a principle that refers to logical possibility to speak about real entities (see École *et al.* 1962, III, 1, §30). This confusion was already noted by Crusius in his *Philosophical Dissertation on the use and Limits of the Principle of Determining (or commonly Sufficient) Reason* of 1743, and Kant in his *New Elucidation* of 1755 (see Carboncini and Finster 1964, VI.1, §xiv; Ak I, 391–410; Perin 2015, pp. 523–529). While the distinction is not entirely explicit in Leibniz either, the complexity of his treatment of the principle of sufficient reason helps explain both his refusal to demonstrate it from the principle of non-contradiction and Kant’s evolving interpretation of Leibniz (see Gutiérrez-García 2025, pp. 596–598).

According to this definition, the possibility of extrinsic denominations within a substance—that is, predicates referring to something other than the substance itself—is excluded. For Kant, however, such determinations are precisely those that are given in phenomena: “the inner determinations of a *substantia phaenomenon* in space, on the contrary, are nothing but relations, and it is itself entirely a sum total of mere relations” (A265/B321). Accordingly, Kant argues that Leibniz “represented the distinction of the inner and outer merely in relation to the understanding” (A274/B330), where only non-relational inner determinations are admissible. What remains as an internal determination, then, is nothing but the state of representations (*Zustand der Vorstellungen*). Indeed, Leibniz defines monads as representational powers, inasmuch as they represent the world from a particular point of view (cf. GP VI, 621).

Kant points out two fundamental consequences of this. First, Leibniz was compelled to propose the hypothesis of pre-established harmony in place of physical influence: since substances can only contain their own representational states, communication between substances had to be explained through a pre-established harmony between soul and body (cf. A275/B331). Leibniz formulates this thesis as follows:

(§78) The soul follows its own laws, and the body likewise follows its own; they meet in virtue of the pre-established harmony among all substances, since all are representations of the same universe.

(§79) Souls act according to the laws of final causes [...]. Bodies act according to the laws of efficient causes, or of motion. And the two realms [...] are in harmony with one another. (GP VI, 620)

It remains to be seen whether this formulation is genuinely incompatible with physical influence between substances. While interpretations such as Wolff’s fall into a certain equivocation between the real and the existent—as previously seen, Leibniz, in this respect, draws a clear distinction between the two realms.²⁰ To deny the existence of extrinsic denominations—in substances—does not mean denying that bodies can be active or passive with respect to other bodies. The problem for Leibniz lies rather in how such actions can be explained. While every action of a body may be reduced to an infinite series of mechanical causes, the ultimate reason for these actions must lie in a metaphysical cause—none other than the substantial form, the notion of substance. As Leibniz famously writes to Remond:

When I was searching for the ultimate reasons of mechanism and of the laws of motion themselves, I was surprised to find that it was impossible to discover them in mathematics, and that I had to return to metaphysics. This led me back to entelechies, and from the material to the formal, and finally made me understand [...] that monads, or simple substances, are the only true substances, and that material things are only phenomena—yet well-founded and well-connected ones. (GP III, 606)

This notion of substance by no means excludes the possibility that physical individuals, as expressions of these substances, remain in mutual interaction.²¹ The monad is the—metaphysical—ground of substantiality (see 2.5. Matter and form), the concept that gathers together all the predicates of the substance; but this does not prevent the monad from being phenomenally expressed and participating in composites (cf. GP VI, 607). As Leibniz states in the *Logical-Metaphysical Principles*, pre-established harmony stands in opposition to metaphysical influence, not to physical influence:²²

Every individual substance exerts physical action and passion upon all others. When one undergoes a change, a corresponding change follows in all the rest, insofar as the denominations varies [...]. Strictly speaking, it may be said that no created substance exerts a metaphysical action or influence upon another. (AA VI, 4, 1646–1647)

To ignore this is to overlook a fundamental aspect of Leibniz’s philosophy—namely, his study of bodies and their physical properties. In this regard, Leibniz follows the same pattern seen above in relation to the concept of the monad: although it is necessary to determine a metaphysical foundation for motion and other physical phenomena, their explanation is not to be given through abstract concepts (see Phemister 1999, pp. 68–70).²³ For example, when examining Cartesian physics, Leibniz points out that even if one admits a concept such as substantial form, explanations of phenomena such as “elastic force and other effects must always proceed mechanically—that is, through figures, as modifications of matter, and through impetuses, as modifications of form” (GP IV, 397).

2.5. Matter and form

Finally, Kant’s critique in this section revolves around the confusion between two concepts that serve as the basis of reflection: matter and form. According to Kant, Leibniz misunderstood the relation between these

²⁰ As Kahl-Furthmann observes (cf. 1976, p. 110), Wolff’s appropriation of Leibnizian principles is marked by the abandonment of others, such as the principle of pre-established harmony and the identity of indiscernibles. In this regard, see Robert 2018.

²¹ This conception does not invalidate the critique found in the Paralogisms, which can also be applied to the Leibnizian concept of monad. In this section—as Wilson suggests, Kant “criticizes an argument that attempts to prove from the nature of thought or perception that the thinking self is an absolutely simple and hence immaterial entity” (1974, p. 509).

²² The possibility of metaphysical influence is represented by another concept that Leibniz attempts to incorporate into his philosophy in response to the religious question of transmigration: the ‘*vinculum substantiale*’ (see Antognazza 2009, pp. 477–478). In his correspondence with Des Bosses, Leibniz makes it clear that introducing this concept could raise serious problems for the coherence of his system (cf. GP II, 499)—something that is by no means the case with pre-established harmony.

²³ In the *Specimen Dynamicum* (1st part), Leibniz notes the necessity of identifying a metaphysical principle to account for the motion of bodies (see GM VI, 241). Later in the same text, he clarifies that the intervention of final causes poses no problem for sciences such as physics (see 243).

two concepts and took it to be a relation that occurs merely within the understanding. Matter—as the determinable—and form—as its determination—stand in a particular relation within the concept of pure understanding (cf. A266/B322). In this domain, Kant states, “matter precedes form” (A267/B323). However, in sensible intuition, there is a prior formality that precedes all matter—namely, the conclusion already reached in the Transcendental Aesthetic: that space and time are the transcendental forms of sensible intuition (see B59–72). From this context, Kant articulates two criticisms of Leibniz, centered on the following idea: since Leibniz conceived of appearances through concepts of pure understanding, he could only represent things as material elements to which no formality precedes:

The intellectualist philosopher could not bear it that form should precede the things and determine their possibility [...]. But since sensible intuition is an entirely peculiar subjective condition, which grounds all perception *a priori*, and the form of which is original, thus the form is given for itself alone. (A267–268/B323–324)

Two conclusions—according to Kant—follow from this, and they constitute the target of his critique: the idea of the monad and the view of sensible intuition as a second-order faculty. First, by mistaking the relation between matter and form and considering it solely within the understanding, Kant claims that Leibniz “assumed things (monads) and an internal power of representation in them, in order subsequently to ground on that their outer relation and the community of their states” (A267/B323). Second, by presupposing things first and relegating the sensible form of all intuition to a secondary role, Leibniz is said to have conceived sensible intuition as a second-order faculty: in conceiving substances as intelligible substances (*substantiae noumenae*), Leibniz sought to apply concepts proper to such substances to appearances, “since he conceded to sensibility no kind of intuition on its own [...], and left nothing for the senses but the contemptible occupation of confusing and upsetting the representations of the former [the understanding]” (A276/B332; see also A270/B326). Since this latter point—and its greater applicability to Wolff than to Leibniz—has already been extensively discussed (see Parkinson 1981; Jauernig 2008; Fichant 2017), I shall focus on the former.

It seems puzzling—in light of the considerations developed in the previous section (see 2.4. Inner and outer)—to think that Leibniz could have upheld an empirical conception of the monad, that is, one that treats it as a thing in the world. Let us examine closely why this is not the case. In his *New System of Nature and the Communication of Substances* (1695), Leibniz develops an original line of argument as to why the hypothesis of pre-established harmony must be regarded as more than a mere hypothesis;²⁴ as we saw in the previous section, pre-established harmony is essentially linked to the notion of the monad as a metaphysical ground of substantiality—a ground detached from any phenomenon or material mass given in the world, yet nonetheless in harmony with each of the phenomena of its body:

It may be said that it is more than a hypothesis, since it does not seem possible to explain things in any other intelligible way [...]. It is true that in matter not only emissions but also receptions of parts are easily conceived, and that for this reason all physical phenomena may be explained mechanically. But since material mass is not a substance, it is clear that the action in relation to the substance itself could only be the one I have just described. (GP IV, 486)

This view of the monad as an intelligible substance renders coherent two claims that might otherwise appear inconsistent: Leibniz’s rejection of atomism (see GM VI, 248; Kahl-Furthmann 1976, p. 109) and his assertion that monads are the “true atoms of nature” (GP VI, 607)—precisely because they lack extension, shape, and matter. For Leibniz, the monad is a formal, logical concept. It is the condition of intelligibility of composites—the principle that grounds their unity. Yet the monad is expressed in a body (see F, 154), and this expression is governed by the mechanical laws of physical phenomena. This conception also diverges significantly from the way in which Wolff understands monads, namely, as spatio-temporal entities (cf. Cicovacki 2009, p. 82). As Fichant has pointed out, whereas Leibniz sought to deny the existence of simple elements of a corporeal nature, Wolff took the opposite path—that of dualism—which led him to endorse a corpuscular theory:

Thus, Wolffian dualism requires acknowledging what Leibniz denied: the existence of elements of corporeal nature. There is no need here to go further into details of the composition of the physical world, in which Wolff distinguishes several levels of composition of bodies from basic elements, associated to form ‘primitive corpuscles’, which in turn combine into ‘derived corpuscles’, all of them inaccessible to direct observation. (2017, p. 33)

It would seem, then, that the ‘intellectualist philosopher’ to whom Kant refers (cf. A267/B323) is more Wolff than Leibniz. Kant himself would later acknowledge the proximity between the monadological view of Leibniz—as presented in the texts discussed above—and the conclusions of the Transcendental Aesthetic. For instance, in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), he states:

²⁴ This kind of argument is not unfamiliar in Leibniz’s work. One of the most significant passages in which he employs it appears in the *Demonstration of Primary Propositions* (1671–1672), where Leibniz introduces—by way of a counterfactual—the possibility of doubting the validity of the principles of human understanding: “And yet, by eliminating the absolute and rigorous universality of these propositions, the certainty of all the propositions that the human spirit has discovered has been called into question” (AA VI, 2, 480).

[Monadology] has nothing at all to do with the explanation of natural appearances, but is rather an intrinsically correct Platonic concept of the world devised by Leibniz, insofar as it is considered, not at all as the object of the senses, but as a thing in itself, and is merely an object of the understanding, which, however, does indeed underlie the appearance of the senses. [...] Therefore, Leibniz's idea, so far as I comprehend it, was not to explicate space through the order of simple beings next to one another, but was rather to set this order alongside space as corresponding to it, but as belonging to a merely intelligible world (unknown to us). Thus, he asserts nothing but what has been shown elsewhere: namely, that space, together with the matter of which it is the form, does not contain the world of things in themselves, but only their appearance, and is itself only the form of our outer sensible intuition. (Ak IV, 507–quoted in Cicovacki 2009, p. 83)

3. Final remarks

The aim of this study has been to examine the reason behind the alleged ambiguity in Kant's critical reception of Leibniz throughout his work. To this end, the various criticisms found in the *Amphiboly* have been analyzed in light of Leibniz's own texts and theses. Rather than confirming any inconsistency in Kant's analysis, what this study aims to present is a dynamic and productive picture of Kant's attitude toward Leibniz: one in which the Kantian critique—particularly in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—is primarily directed at a reduced or simplified version of Leibniz's metaphysics, one that aligns Wolff's systematic reinterpretation. Over time, however, Kant's position shifts, giving way in his later writings to a more nuanced view that recognizes the originality of Leibniz's thought, to the point of considering him a precursor of certain aspects of transcendental philosophy. It is for this reason that the context of the criticisms developed in the *Amphiboly* proves especially significant from the perspective of the historical development of Leibniz's reception.

In the *Amphiboly*, Kant argues that the four pairs of concepts of reflection—identity and diversity, agreement and opposition, the inner and the outer, matter and form—are presented in an overly 'intellectualist' manner by Leibniz. However, the analysis of the texts shows that this criticism targets not the historical or even the thematic Leibniz, but rather a reconstruction—Wolff's version—which, in aiming for systematic coherence, overlooks some of the most important features of Leibniz's philosophy, such as the various domains of applicability and function of principles of rationality, the distinction between metaphysical and phenomenal levels, and the correspondence between the orders of reason, language, and reality.

The alleged ambiguity in Kant's position should therefore be understood as part of a philosophical development in the reception of Leibniz. This development involves a transition from a critique of dogmatic metaphysics—which, as we have seen, still applies to certain assumptions of empirical psychology—to a renewed appreciation of the broad and complex meaning of key Leibnizian concepts. Moreover, it allows us to situate Kant not as a thinker who merely breaks with the tradition, but as one who critically reclaims it and moves beyond it. Does this mean that Leibniz was not a 'dogmatic' philosopher? Certainly not. Leibnizian philosophy contains many elements that can rightly be considered dogmatic from the perspective of critical philosophy—most of them identified in the Paralogisms of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, what this does mean is that when we approach a historical figure philosophically, we should—just as Kant did—attend to the complexity and diversity of their thesis, rather than rest content with a clearer but incomplete conception of them. Philosophy requires time; history of philosophy—when considered in all its complexity—demands ever more.

By highlighting the complexity of Leibniz's own formulations and indicating how these were altered in Wolff's interpretation, this article hopes to contribute not only to research on Leibniz and Kant, but also to broader debates concerning the history of modern rationalism and the various transformations that metaphysics underwent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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