

Starting from a leibnizian unpublished writing. Interpretation and educational proposal by Umberto Margiotta*

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ABSTRACT: This article is about the analysis and translation of an unpublished Leibniz by Umberto Margiotta. It is a little-known text but of great importance not only from the point of view of the history of education but also from that of the epistemology of training. The interest in Margiotta's work on the Leibnizian *Confession* is born in relation to its hermeneutic key: an epistemological formative, which opens up spaces for reflection on the educational question of the present in comparison with the strategic gaze of one of the most original thinkers of Modernity. In the mid-eighties of the last century, the Italian scholar dedicated himself to the translation (from Latin) and interpretation of the short writing of the German philosopher and scientist to emphasize the emergence, in the dialogic form of the text, of the necessity of the Method. Educational research needs, to be effective, logical foundations that also assume an ethical value, since they outline the role of the human being in the order of the universe and place him in a position to choose and decide on the direction of his *probable* action. Hence the deep sense of *responsibility* that freedom has its *raison d'être*, a wonderful synthesis of Leibniz's lesson on the meaning of the human in its essential relationship with the divine.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Leibniz; Umberto Margiotta; Responsibility; Educational proposal; XX Century.

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1. *Introduction. Freedom and responsibility*

It may seem unusual today to publish in the mid-eighties of the twentieth century the translation of an unpublished by Leibniz, supporting its current relevance. Yet Umberto Margiotta is on this line, considering it «a useful provocation for that vast and increasingly transdisciplinary field which is the pedagogical research»¹. First of all, it is interesting to look at the trans-disciplinarity of a knowledge that needs continuity in research, also thanks to «a work of genetic reconstruction and epistemological uncovering of the concept of educational space»². It is known that the Italian scholar strongly supported the need for a History of the Method, and in the *Confessio* he precisely sees three relevant arguments in relation to the educational problems of contemporaneity. The first is the *problem of peace*, which is anguishing our present in front of a destructive madness we had lost the memory in our Continent. The second argument explores a significant question: *the problem of the relationship between freedom and ideology in terms of responsibility*, while the third puts the emphasis on the possibility of secularism even in reflection about the divine and its creative work. The *Confessio*, which recalls the Augustinian spirit of the search for truth, is not by chance the dialogue between a philosopher and a theologian.

The Italian interpreter and translator considers that «a work of ideological purification of opposing truths and beliefs»³, that it must find in the educational process a common strategy of commitment and responsibility. The Irenism of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries – in this last Leibniz was an authoritative representative – felt a shortage that can be found even in the present time: the lack of a *conventional alphabet* which made it possible to understand different languages and to compare different sensitivities, which were nevertheless aimed at achieving peace. Certainly, the proposal of the German philosopher for a logical conventionality may seem ineffective today, which would be universally acceptable on the basis of the rationally incontrovertible proof. The question is particularly about «rational controllability of the relationship between ideology and freedom in man, (...)»⁴. Leibniz's modernity lies in the awareness of the moral drama that confronts us with the uncertainty of existence and, therefore, the only chance seems to be offered by action. The educational probability suggests Margiotta, «able to regenerate and translate, by dialectic ascended, the personal human and moral experience in concepts, in observation procedures, in visible ends, in values of coexistence

¹ G.W. Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, ed. by U. Margiotta, Venezia, Cafoscarina, 1985, p. XI.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XII.

and intersubjective communication»⁵. The argument seems to us of great interest in that it argues for the possibility of a transition from life experience to the order of methodological tools and the guide of ethics: «the Leibniz logic lesson is essential for a reconstruction of the problem of responsibility as central to the research programme of the basic pedagogy»⁶. The latter, in the Leibniz perspective, represents a questioning of the object itself of educational Knowledge, its birth and evolution: «In the plurality of points of view, the *method of pedagogy* is originally thought up, and is now critically proposed as a *method of complexity*, In short, as a fundamental route for mastering the continuous adjustments that must be made to partial disciplinary syntheses in Knowledge and conduct of man»⁷. We are struck by the methodological leap in the direction of complexity, a provocative leap, aimed at reminding *disciplinary syntheses* that do not represent an absolute or a hierarchical primacy but a significant part of the whole, according to that view of the universal order on which in particular the most intransigent scientists could dwell doubtfully: «(...) it is unreasonable to introduce a sovereign intelligence that orders things and then, instead of resorting to its wisdom, use the properties of matter to explain phenomena»⁸. For the Italian education philosopher Leibniz is a *mentor*, particularly within a century – the Seventeenth century – crucial to trace the roots of the *basic* pedagogy of our time.

For Leibniz, freedom is an indispensable condition of self-determination, in an anti-mechanistic perspective that translates into *responsibility*. An element of extraordinary interest in that implies continuity of commitment in the choices and orientations. Margiotta points out that in the present we recognize freedom and responsibility not so much in concepts, but in concrete *values* that connote lived experience. However, the logical imprint suggested by the German philosopher «is suggestive because it reanimates, in the very heart of freedom and responsibility, the essentiality to it of the educational problem as a problem of rules and method»⁹. The method, constant reference point of the Italian scholar, must be framed in its educational *essential* at the very heart of freedom and responsibility. The probability, category to which we have referred, is always intersubjective, it is not acquired with experience but is an exercise of probable action that translates into «art of analysis»¹⁰; but, warns our epistemologist, «Any synthesis (of experience, education, knowledge) as far as it can make us discover wonderful truths, in cases where it cannot use the method of exclusions, must take from analysis the guiding thread. So,

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. XIV-XV.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XV.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. XLVII.

⁸ G.W. Leibniz, *Discorsi di Metafisica*, in *Scritti filosofici*, ed. by D.O. Bianca, Torino, UTET, 1988, Vol. I, p. 87.

⁹ Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, cit., p. XIV.

¹⁰ Id., *Nuovi Saggi*, IV, 2, in *Scritti filosofici*, Torino, UTET, 1967, p. 114.

there will be no ethical experience, no values, no intention without logic»¹¹. It seems important to clarify what is meant by the method of exclusions, starting from the difference that the German philosopher makes between *truth of reason* and *truth of fact*. The first, based on formal logic, presents a condition of necessity, therefore according to the principle of non-contradiction exclude, for example, that a proposition can be both true and false. The *truths of fact*, inherent in the actual reality, are not subject to the principles of formal logic, therefore their opposite is possible and, nevertheless, they are based on the principle of *sufficient reason*, whose causality is not necessitating but contingent, or such that the subject has sufficient Knowledge of a thing, so that he can explain its condition of existence. On the educational level, it is of the utmost importance to grasp the differences between the two strategic models of thinking.

Anyone who intends – pedagogue, researcher, education epistemologist – to follow a training project based on responsibility, will have to undertake studies of logic: «the normative character of logic determines, in fact, the meeting point of ethical problems and gnoseological problems, pragmatics, semantics and rhetoric»¹². The foundation of pedagogical research will consist (Margiotta uses the verb to the future) in the identification of the logical *preconditions*, beyond the descriptive modalities of the educational fact. The logic of education is aimed at making intelligible, although on a plane of abstractions, what supports educational choices, as well as describing the development of the educational fact, in so far as it is *observable, cognitive, determined*, by checking the logical consistency of the design hypothesis. It is now a question of understanding why the interpreter in front of the *universal* mind of a thinker who has ranged from jurisprudence to history, from theology to politics, from mathematics to physics, to philosophy, he concentrated on a short essay in dialogic form on the theme of *human freedom* and *divine justice*. A hint of response is evident in the perspective of its methodological interest, in relation to the world of education, but it may be useful to consider the way in which Margiotta investigates the *structure* of the *Confessio* to grasp its suggestive elements.

In the first of the three parts of the dialogue the subject is the justice of God but, in particular, Margiotta emphasizes the basic concepts that are identified by the author to give continuity to the arguments *in itinere*; it is *necessary, contingent, possible* and of the two verbs *to allow* and *to want*. God cannot be the moral cause of sin, but physical cause, therefore it is indispensable to rigorously establish the freedom of man, who is morally responsible for sin: « The originality of the work is in this continuous call by Leibniz to the concreteness of human life, whose existence can be rationally understood but nev-

¹¹ Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, cit., p. XV.

¹² *Ibid.*

er predictable»¹³. Every individual life is in a condition of dependence on the growth of the subject, on the context and on the time when it takes shape. The German thinker introduces the word *series* with a significant specificity, which is identified in the process and rhythm of cosmic life in which human beings are involved in their personal peculiarity. Another important matter is the rigorous development of the principle of sufficient reason, which is no longer as originally an expression of critical mode addressed to mechanical reason, in fact unusable in the understanding of human phenomena, but «taken as the whole of the requirements of existence»¹⁴. Finally, a characterization of the human subject emerges that goes beyond the concept of *globality*, previously argued, as a concrete existence in its entirety. Here «man is identified by virtue of the order he occupies in the universe»¹⁵; his freedom is characterized by the *here* and *now*, and it is in this context that he must give direction to his own existence. In reflecting on the structure of the work, Margiotta does not fail to grasp once again the formative scope that, on the one hand, refers to the educational culture of the Sixteenth century and the Medieval work of Raymond Lullo: *Ars compendiosa inveniendi veritatem seu ars magna et maior* (1274); on the other hand, it penetrates with radical depth of ethical character into the themes of the *Reformed Christian theodicy* (freedom and predestination).

2. *The Irenic movement and the reconciliation production*

The dialogue in question, in the intention of the author, wants to support the possibility of agreement between Reason and Revelation, based in particular on the «natural theology» of the time and leaving little space for the ‘revealed truth’. The central thesis of the *pre-established harmony* allows Leibniz to identify an identity continuity between God and man, made «in his image» and, thanks to this, «(...) justice as reason and truth are one and the same in God and among men, however freely and distinctly they are according to all the differences of degree that separate the one from the other»¹⁶.

The writing, in Latin, can be dated to 1673 or shortly before and it is relevant to consider that the philosopher of Leipzig had known in 1671 the baron von Boineburg, a leading figure of the Irenic movement which spreads in Central Europe between the different courts, with the aim of overcoming the disturbing religious wars between Christians through a reconciliation between the churches. The baron, among other things, favored Leibniz’s role as advisor

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. XIX.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XXI.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.

to the elector of Mainz and the philosopher applied for a role of mediation and arbitration between Protestants and Catholics. Hence the desire to develop a theodicy capable of supporting *methods of meeting* aimed at facilitating discussion between differences animated by the common will to meet: «The fundamental themes of human coexistence, and especially the themes of human freedom and justice of God are treated with formal mathematical deductive rigor [...]»¹⁷.

The opportunity in 1672 to go on a diplomatic mission to the court of Louis XIV, to prevent the invasion of Holland, allowed the scholar prolific contact with philosophers and mathematicians, so much so that he was induced to write important works in French. Consequently, he was oriented to «propose a model of certainty, regarding the most densely problematic themes of the time (the problem of God's justice, predestination, human freedom)»¹⁸. What is certainty? In general, one could say a mathematical approach to problems that generated wide-ranging doubts in the culture of the time, especially with the entry into crisis of the so-called «Republic of Letters», of broad scope in the Renaissance, the progressive abandonment of the cognitive structures of Platonic and neo-Platonic matrix. Margiotta sees in that «Repubblica» and its encyclopedias, qualifying elements on the level of education, in particular the «cultivation of character through learning»¹⁹, without neglecting a new hermeneutic of the Aristotelian psychology thanks to the development of an empirical approach, in the late Renaissance, aimed at identifying in the *affections* the cognitive starting point that «ended in the formation of practical wisdom, through the promotion, in the student, of the *ingenium*»²⁰. The Italian scholar cites Juan Vives and his learning psychology. The Spanish intellectual of the sixteenth century had prepared three salient elements of the method, *doctrina*, *disciplina* and *ingenium*, and in *De Ratione Discendi*²¹ he stressed that education should provide continuity sense-feeling, knowledge-understanding, up to solid character formation.

A widely debated theme of how evil is analysed from different perspectives, during the Seventeenth century, reveals the relationship «of interconnection that was thought to be discovered between the concepts of method, order and harmony»²². The *evil* has been mentioned because it is not lacking in originality to highlight its positive nature, both in the natural and moral environment, when one finds oneself having to «justify» destructive evils such as the earthquake of Lisbon, the plague, the wars. On the other hand, sin is insidious and contaminates the very *kingdom of grace*; the philosopher observes consistently

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. XXVIII.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. XXX.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cf. J. Vives, *De ratione dicendi. La retorica*, testo latino, Napoli, La Città del Sole, 2002.

²² *Ibid.*, p. XXIX.

in his *Confessio*: «Even if God is indeed the cause, he is not however the author of sins, and, if I am allowed to speak scholastically, I would say: *the ultimate physical cause of sins* (as of all creatures) is God, the moral cause is in the sinner»²³.

But, on the basis of scientific investigation, can evil be reduced to human sins? In fact, we are moving far away in discussions and debates from the vision of the Old Testament, tending to agglomerate the evils in general, including natural ones, in the original sin. This detachment is due mainly to mechanistic, logical and mathematical positions. Certainly, there was a specific attention to identify in the corrupt human nature the spread of moral evil, also because in the reformed theology frequently reference was made to the goodness of nature to underline its lack in the human subject. This *ecological* vision of natural balance did not derive from the *Scriptures* but from Platonic harmony, while there was a scientific orientation aimed at supporting the condition of natural neutrality both in relation to good and evil. In the theological circles and university faculties of Central and Northern Europe a historical theory of divine revelation, and of possible salvation, based on a succession of pacts between God and men, spread: «In this way history became an exemplary ground of the struggle between God and evil: the kingdom of grace would conquer the world only when men had increased to such a point the natural light of reason, that it assured victory»²⁴.

The breadth of the debate on the rooting of evil in history, and for some even in nature, led us to consider how the kingdom of grace could be made feasible, also through political choices and organizational modalities of civil society. It is in this perspective, also considering the disarray of the thirty years' war, that religious reconciliation was promoted, according to a clear educational mark oriented towards universal peace. Much was done, and not only by Leibniz, to encourage a general agreement on articles of faith and reason to share. Margiotta emphasizes the commitment of Ugo Grozio in order to identify a theological basis for pacification, considering his role as jurisconsult, among the first to support the natural law: for him the natural law is the product of human reason, which is able to distinguish between good and evil. The interlocutors of the *Confessio* present a profile built *ad hoc* to address the identified topics: the *catechumenal philosopher* (sometimes called *epistemon*) and the *catechist theologian*. Only in appearance should one learn and the other teach, since there is no normal master-student asymmetry. Moreover, the figure of the theologian, Margiotta reminds us, finds a precise reference in the person of the Danish bishop Nicolaus Steno, famous naturalist of the time, with whom Leibniz discussed the text in question, identifying elements for comparison with Cartesian thought. The two did not get along and polemized:

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XXXV.

«In short, Steno was for Leibniz a *spiritualist* who, despite his past as a naturalist, did not intend to mix mathematics with metaphysics, nor compare faith with reason»²⁵. In essence there is an opposite way of dealing with the great religious and philosophical problems of the time.

3. *Ars inveniendi and pedagogy*

Leibniz's attention to the quoted *Ars inveniendi* of Lullo is deep and can represent one of the elements that caused silence on his thought between Eighteenth and Nineteenth century, as Margiotta also reminds us, we seem to be able to say with a pinch of irony, fascinated by the theme given the constant epistemological passion. We start from a well-known definition: «The term *clavis universalis* was used, between the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries, to indicate that method or that general science which place man in a position to grasp, beyond the phenomenal appearances, or the *shadows of ideas*, the ideal structure or texture that constitutes the essence of reality»²⁶. From the middle of the Fourteenth century until the end of the seventeenth, the topics dealt with by Lullo in the Middle Ages were expanded in various directions: language, memory, philosophy, the sign-image relationship, etc. Projects aimed at updating research in the fields of logic and rhetoric, orienting analysis «[...] to classifications, signs and hieroglyphics, symbols and images» (Ibidem). Generations of scholars followed one another in the investigation of this *ars magna*, which elaborated rules relating to the study of memory, speech, argumentation and persuasion, until «to teach the type of connection that must exist between the places of mnemotechnique and the *images* that have to be placed in them to study the great art of Lullo, to elaborate the complicated rules of combinatorics [...]»²⁷. Many may be led to see a link with current information communication technology, but the radical difference in context should be carefully considered.

Referring to the dialogue, not easy and sometimes even scathing, between Leibniz and Bishop Steno, Margiotta synthesizes an important question: Steno, like other intellectuals of the time, could understand the positions of the philosopher of Leipzig but not *justify* them. The unacceptable, in the correspondence of diffuse signals, is the “methodological paradigm” that tries to juxtapose as in a mosaic the local investigations of various disciplines within a «Reliable global rationality in relation to the system of science and the com-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. XXXVIII.

²⁶ P. Rossi, *Clavis Universalis. Arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria da Lullo a Leibniz*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1983, p. 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

munication itself between disciplines»²⁸. The understandable mistrust was directed towards the *universal and cosmic justification* of innovation processes in Knowledge in the most disparate fields, despite the ambiguities and sometimes confused choices, which had an effect on both research and social life. The defense of the Italian scholar should be reported with a quotation full of meaning, which lends itself to some consideration: «And of Leibniz, perhaps, what seems to us instead constitutes the emblematic figure of his research: not so much that of the metaphysical or logistical foundation of an organic universe, but rather, *the demonstration of the existence (and communication) of universes of experience, discourse and research among them compossibles*»²⁹. Margiotta does not express a certainty, but a doubt about a misunderstanding related to the cultural environment and its conservative tension. What matters most, in his opinion, is not the metaphysical construction of the monadistic universe, but the discovery – we like the term here, although questionable – of *universes of experience* that communicate with each other, just as in studies on the complexity of the contemporary world. It is not surprising, then, that, about a century after the publication of the *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria*, Kant «radically excluded that the composed ideas protected to be represented by the combination of signs and compared Leibniz's characteristic to the inconclusive dreams of alchemy»³⁰.

The timeless charm of *ars inveniendi* lies, however, in the propensity to the new and the unknown, given a well-established practice that is exercised on the *relations of method*; utopia, however, emerges from the conviction that the logical-demonstrative concatenation «an unambiguous and adequate intra-theoretical and trans-disciplinary communication»³¹. We are reminded that the youthful interest in combinatorial art was sustained by a platonic-pythagorean worldview, just as mathematical research was oriented to the metaphysical-theological dimension³², to emphasize the intrinsic originality of the thinker. By virtue of this, even when its synthesis appears partial they are still courageous and represent a framework of educational reference of great depth: «that which is related to the recognition of a characteristic need of man, who not only invents the forms of historical experience, theoretical and practical, but reflects on them and their activities, asking for their possibility and meaning, and questioning their effectiveness and transmissibility»³³.

²⁸ Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, cit., p. XXXIX.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Rossi, *Clavis Universalis. Arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria da Lullo a Leibniz*, cit., p. 22.

³¹ Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, cit., p. XL.

³² F. Barone, *Logica Formale e Logica Trascendentale*, Milano, Unicopli, 2005, p. 62.

³³ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

It could be generalized that each of us is in a position to prepare ‘syntheses’ of his life history that assume self-formative value; but the Knowledge of education can and must take us beyond the *invention* of forms of experience, towards that reflection of nuances which is the result of the *method*. And, speaking of method, the Leibnizian perspective of *ars inveniendi* is characterized by the rejection of the Cartesian ideal of observer neutrality, opposing it to an epistemological position built on «Awareness of the reducible multiplicity of points of view and observers»³⁴. For the German philosopher, it is indispensable to propose an *ars* capable of constructing “simple terms” but effective and “elementary concepts” but appropriate to the purpose, also thanks to simplifying combinations, both in language and thought. Even more relevant is the commitment to the direction of a universal writing, which can be understood by all and structured in order to contain within itself the knowledge related to the indispensable things: «Leibniz, the illustrious continuator of the Lullian and Comenian pansofico encyclopaedia, aims ultimately, with extreme pedagogical vigour, to find a language»³⁵ that possesses simultaneously the *art of discovering* and the *art of judging*. The linguistic signs, like the algebraic signs, represent a divine gift and yet are faint traces of a darker mystery.

Leibniziana’s deterministic morality is also founded on logical and metaphysical bases: «The principle of sufficient reason in fact introduces, in ethics, the principle of contingency»³⁶ and we already know its difference with respect to necessity. We have also spoken of *probability*, which allows us to say «that life is essentially a project»³⁷; but if we understand the *ars inveniendi* as a method, we discover its ability to identify the *ideal structure* of reality, coinciding with the divine essence, that it is the result of scientific inquiry and not of a theology. The focus on the Leibnizian problem in Margiotta ends up having an eminently pedagogical end which is expressed in these terms: «But the contemporary court of the pedagogue must take due account of all this: a genealogical account, meanwhile, and critical together, to understand where and why it originates that *drift of meaning* conferred on the term *pedagogy* (*italics is ours*), which in truth never entirely coincides with the current use of the word»³⁸. First of all, the *tribunal* is striking, recalling the Kantian *critique* of reason as a tool for investigation, both critical and genealogical, to address the *drift* that accompanies the term in the present. Secondly, it is like being in a metaphorical jungle full of pitfalls: good or bad teaching methods, evalu-

³⁴ Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, cit., p. XLI.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. XLIV.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. XLII.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. XLV.

ation problems, relations with institutions and families, relations with other knowledge, particularly «human sciences». Yet our interpreter, almost with impatience, suggests that we look at the birth and evolution of modern pedagogy «as the other side of the problem of Knowledge»³⁹.

The *basic pedagogy*, which has been mentioned above, is to be considered as a solid *foundation on which to build the training process*, «Here is the radical questioning of the object of pedagogy, as it is born and is configured in that time period as a very fundamental pedagogy of intellect and invention»⁴⁰. The reference to specific Leibnizian terms is relevant, in our opinion, since the German philosopher not only focuses on *intelligere* as a *fundamental* element but also on *inventing*, which involves the use of the imaginary as a resource that goes beyond reason⁴¹. Margiotta clarifies the need for pedagogy to assume an anti-nominalistic and anti-mechanistic character, a real form of liberation from conditionalities that sometimes remain in hidden form, to organize itself around «cognitive demands» The progressive learning related.

One point remains central, which our education epistemologist strongly outlines: «It is therefore the type of organization of knowledge and its paradigms, that is to say the program of intra-theoretical and *trans-disciplinary* communication which decides profoundly on the educational style, both in those who learn and in those who teach»⁴². Half a century ago, Margiotta used the two terms of communication, intra-theoretical and trans-disciplinary, as determining factors in the fundamental pedagogy of the present, adding that this should concern both those who learn and those who teach. The evidence is that theories need to dialogue with each other in order to consolidate a critical approach to knowledge and, at the same time, the central issue of the transition-exchange between model disciplines is stressed, methods, approaches, which sanctify the convergences and the divergences, in the perspective of a metacognitive dynamic that requires the active participation of the subjects involved.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. XLVI.

⁴¹ Cfr. G. Durand, *Le strutture antropologiche dell'immaginario: introduzione all'archetipologia generale*, Bari, Dedalo, 1972.

⁴² Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi*, cit., p. XLVII.