1. Introduction

If one is trying to interpret a philosopher’s writings, it is important to pay careful attention to anything that philosopher says about the way he or she conceives of philosophical writing. I take this to be a self-evident principle of historical scholarship. It would be a mistake, for example, to attempt to interpret Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed without taking into consideration his remarks on the esoteric nature of his writing in the introduction to that work. Similarly, if one is trying to interpret Descartes’ Meditations it is important to consider his remarks in the Second Replies about why he composes that text according to the method of analysis rather than the method of synthesis. There is plenty of room for disagreement about the precise nature of Maimonides’ esotericism and about how exactly Descartes understands the method of analysis, but the claim that their remarks on the nature of their philosophical writing must be taken into consideration is beyond dispute.

Leibniz, like Maimonides and Descartes, makes important remarks about how he conceives of his philosophical writings. One of the most significant claims he makes is that many of his writings are “exoteric” or “popular.” One would think, given the self-evident interpretive principle mentioned above, that these remarks would have received extensive attention in the secondary literature on Leibniz. That has not been the case. While some important things have been written about how he conceives of his exoteric texts, a comprehensive account of this topic has not been set forth. A comprehensive account would (1) isolate the relevant texts and explain how Leibniz distinguishes between the esoteric and the exoteric, (2) explain the main problems that give rise to the need for exoteric writing, (3) explain the main

function of exoteric writing, and (4) isolate some of the key rhetorical strategies that he uses in his exoteric writing. My overarching aim in this paper is to provide just such a comprehensive account.4

It is not entirely surprising that this topic has not received sustained attention in the secondary literature. The first reason for this is that exoteric writing is typically implicit. Exoteric writing is, roughly, the art of partly revealing and partly concealing one’s views.5 If an author is writing this way in a particular text, he or she will not typically state this fact up front. In most cases being fully explicit would undermine the point of writing exoterically by drawing attention to the very thing that the author is concerned not to fully disclose to the reader. This is true of Leibniz. His cues that he is utilizing an exoteric strategy are typically subtle — if they are present at all. While he does claim that his published writings are exoteric, most of his remarks to this effect are tucked away in personal notes or letters to some of his more trusted correspondents. Furthermore, some of his most detailed remarks on esoteric and exoteric writing occur very early in his career. They are thus easy to miss if one is focused on his later texts, which have received the bulk of the attention in the secondary literature.

Another reason that this topic has been neglected is that the distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric is frequently associated

4. The account that I present in this paper will build on important insights in the work of Donald Rutherford, (1996), Maria Rosa Antognazza, (2009), Heinrich Schepers, (2008), and Christia Mercer, (2001). I will register specific points of agreement and disagreement with these authors in subsequent footnotes.

5. This is the general characterization of esoteric writing provided by Arthur Melzer in his recent monograph Philosophy Between the Lines: the Lost History of Esoteric Writing (2014:2). I use it as a general characterization for “exoteric” rather than “esoteric” writing because of the specific way that Leibniz uses these terms. Melzer argues that the vast majority of writers in the Western tradition prior to the nineteenth century practiced esoteric writing — an important fact that contemporary historical scholarship often ignores. He builds on the controversial work of Leo Strauss, but he goes much further than Strauss in providing extensive textual support for the existence of esoteric writing and in carefully distinguishing its different forms. Melzer’s work provides an impetus for examining the views of particular figures on esoteric writing in more detail (something he does not attempt to do in his synoptic treatment of the topic).

with some of Bertrand Russell’s infamous claims about Leibniz. Russell claimed that the difference between Leibniz’s public and private writings is so significant that they effectively comprise two distinct philosophies: a theologically imbued fantasy designed to please royalty, and his true philosophy, derived from austere logical principles, that he revealed to a select few of his correspondents.6 In recent decades Russell’s view has been rejected; nearly everyone agrees that there is more continuity between Leibniz’s public and private works than Russell was willing to admit.7 Although commentators rightly dismiss Russell’s position, there has not been a concerted effort to provide a thorough and appropriately nuanced account of how we should understand Leibniz’s claim that he presents his philosophy in an exoteric manner in his published works. This is an issue that must be addressed. Leibniz’s use of exoteric writing is pervasive; it is just of a different variety — subtler, more multi-faceted, and more interesting than anything Russell had imagined.

Let me further motivate this investigation by showing how it bears on some of the central questions in Leibniz scholarship. Leibniz was viewed by some of his most famous successors as a deeply systematic philosopher. Certain of his texts, such as the posthumously published Monadologie, were treated as important summaries of the core of his philosophy — a tightly connected system of principles and doctrines that he thought could solve many of the most profound problems with which modern philosophy was grappling.8 This picture of Leibniz becomes more complicated when one is faced with all of the additional texts that have gradually become available: extensive correspondences, notes, and unpublished essays that were written over the course of a fifty-year career. The complexity of Leibniz’s literary remains forces


8. For an overview of the reception of Leibniz’s philosophy see Wilson, (1995).
9. Some recent commentators who have examined a wide range of Leibniz’s texts have suggested that the idea that Leibniz is a successfully systematic philosopher needs to be jettisoned. Daniel Garber, for example, writes: “It is always tempting to ask what Leibniz really thinks, and to try to set out in clear and simple terms just what the Leibnizian philosophy comes to... But when we look at the larger context, the full complexity of his literary remains, Leibniz comes out as a very different kind of thinker. The project of reconstructing the doctrine that Leibniz held, explicitly or under wraps, is fundamentally misguided. What we should be doing, instead, is trying to capture the complexity of his thought, its twists and turns, its hesitations and its affirmations” (2008:78). Garber is quite right to emphasize the importance of looking at all the texts, and of being sensitive to changes in Leibniz’s views over time. However, in this case he has drawn sweeping conclusions about the kind of thinker Leibniz is and about how we should study him without considering any of the texts where Leibniz distinguishes between the esoteric and the exoteric. See also Garber, (2009:388) and (2014:223–32). Catherine Wilson has explicitly rejected the idea that Leibniz is a systematic philosopher: “…Leibniz did not have a metaphysical system, if by that is meant that he envisioned a set of objects, characteristics, and properties — minds, substances, causation, animate life, and perception — about which he tells an interpretive story that is consistent, in the sense that it contains no deep and serious contradictions, and fairly complete, in the sense that it is able to answer relevant questions concerning those terms with its own resources. Nor is it the case that Leibniz detected problems with his conceptions and modified his views to solve them, finally arriving at a mature metaphysics free of gaps and conflicts. Rather, his central ideas are in active competition throughout his career” (1999:373). Wilson is drawing her conclusions prematurely, in my opinion, given that she does not engage Leibniz’s views on exoteric writing.

Before delving into the details, it will be useful to provide an overview of the account I will be presenting in this paper. I believe that Leibniz uses the terms “esoteric” (acroamaticus/acroamatique) and “esoteric” (esotericus/exoterique) in two distinct but related senses. According to the first sense, these words designate different modes of presentation in philosophy. The esoteric mode of presentation is closely analogous to the geometrical model of exposition, where propositions are demonstrated on the basis of axioms and definitions. The exoteric mode is less formal; it presents the views of an author by means of a range of strategies, all of which fall short of rigorous demonstrations. Leibniz views the esoteric mode as providing a kind of ultimate ideal for the presentation of one’s philosophy, but it is not an ideal that he ever attains. Virtually all of his philosophical writings are thus exoteric in the broad sense described above.

The second sense of “esoteric” concerns the content rather than the form of one’s philosophy. Leibniz took his metaphysics to be esoteric in the sense that it involved a range of purely intelligible concepts and principles, many of which were far removed from received opinions or “common sense.” In some texts Leibniz presents the intelligible content of his metaphysics more clearly and accurately than in other texts. When Leibniz characterizes his published works as “exoteric” he does not merely mean that those works are not written according to the esoteric mode, but also that he does not fully reveal the content of his metaphysics in those works. Using this standard, a work can be described as esoteric or exoteric based on the extent to which it reveals the esoteric content of Leibniz’s metaphysics. This is a matter of degree. I believe that nearly all of Leibniz’s metaphysical writings — published works and private letters alike — contain esoteric and exoteric passages. In other words, in the vast majority of Leibniz’s writings on metaphysics, he is partly revealing and partly concealing his views.

I shall argue that there are two closely related and partially overlapping problems that lead Leibniz to write exoterically. Leibniz thought
that any thesis that was far removed from received opinions and “common sense” was likely to be misunderstood, ignored, swiftly rejected, or condemned if it was presented in a straightforward manner. Leibniz was committed to a number of such theses. I will refer to this as “The Problem of Audience Reception.” The second problem is a more restricted version of The Problem of Audience Reception. It focuses on the subset of received opinions that are grounded in what Leibniz regarded as sensory-based prejudices. Leibniz took many of his readers to be committed — explicitly or implicitly — to a sense-based theory of knowledge, and to be completely unaccustomed to conceiving of purely intelligible things. This posed a significant problem for Leibniz because his metaphysics involved a range of purely intelligible concepts and principles. To straightforwardly present the esoteric content of his metaphysics to these readers would be a serious mistake, Leibniz thought. Such readers would almost inevitably misunderstand his views, regard them as absurd, and summarily reject them. I will refer to this as “The Problem of Esoteric Philosophy.”

Most major philosophers in the Western tradition up through the modern period faced The Problem of Audience Reception in one form or another; a smaller number of them faced the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy (Plato, Maimonides, Spinoza, Descartes, and Spinoza, among others). There are a variety of strategies for engaging these problems. To mention several (not mutually exclusive) possibilities, a philosopher might communicate her views orally to a select few; she might only publish her most controversial views posthumously; or, she might utilize some form of exoteric writing to partially reveal and partially conceal her views. Leibniz’s use of this last strategy is quite extensive, in my opinion. It is crucial to recognize, however, that the primary aim of Leibniz’s exoteric writings is not to conceal heretical or politically dangerous views in order to avoid persecution. The primary aim is pedagogical: exoteric texts are designed to serve as intellectual stepping-stones that can help

his readers traverse the gulf between received opinions and esoteric truth. One of the distinctive things about Leibniz’s pedagogical esoteric writing is that it is not designed to enlighten only rare and gifted individuals (as it is in Maimonides, for example). He wants his published writings (along with many of his private correspondences) to enable educated readers of all sorts to understand and appreciate the esoteric content of his metaphysics. This is an incredibly ambitious aim, for the gulf between received opinions and what Leibniz takes to be the esoteric truth is far and wide. Given the extent of this gulf, multiple stepping-stones are required. Utilizing a range of exoteric strategies, he partly reveals and partly conceals his views in his published works and correspondences in an effort to prepare his readers to be able to understand and appreciate a rigorous presentation of his views.

This brings us back to the distinction between esoteric and exoteric modes of presentation and the distinction between esoteric and exoteric content. While we can formulate reasonable hypotheses about what the esoteric content of Leibniz’s metaphysics is, and about the extent to which he conceals and reveals it in particular texts, any presentation of his views in ordinary language is bound to contain some degree of imprecision. Because ordinary language is largely sense-based, it is difficult to clearly communicate claims about intelligible reality by means of this medium. Leibniz recognizes that the most precise way to present the esoteric content of his metaphysics (to readers who have been sufficiently prepared) is in a text that conforms as closely as possible to the strictures of the esoteric mode of presentation, utilizing precise definitions that provide the basis for rigorous demonstrations. As I mentioned above, Leibniz never completes a text that satisfies this lofty ideal. While there are surely a number of factors that led to this state of affairs, one of the most important is that Leibniz did not think that his exoteric texts had been successful enough in preparing readers for a strictly esoteric presentation of his views.

Leo Strauss claims that many philosophers use esoteric or exoteric writing to conceal their true views so as to avoid persecution (1952).
2. Esoteric and Exoteric Modes of Presentation

If we are to understand Leibniz’s account of the distinction between esoteric and exoteric modes of presentation we must first turn to his views on the ideal form that metaphysics should take. As Donald Rutherford has shown, Leibniz conceived of metaphysics as an a priori demonstrative science. In its ideal form metaphysics would be presented in a manner analogous to Euclid’s Elements, where propositions are rigorously demonstrated on the basis of definitions and axioms. The point of departure for this conception of metaphysics is Leibniz’s theory of truth. Leibniz thought that truth consisted in conceptual containment: a proposition is true just in case the concept of the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject. This implies that all metaphysical truths are conceptual truths. Leibniz thought that a concept could be defined by analyzing it into simpler component concepts. A rigorous demonstration, for Leibniz, consists in a “chain of definitions” (catena definitionum) where one moves from premises to a conclusion via the substitution of definitionally equivalent terms (A II.i.398; L:198). In order for such demonstrations to attain the degree of certainty found in geometry they would need to be set forth in a purely formal system, which Leibniz called his “universal characteristic” (characteristica universalis/spécieuse générale). The universal characteristic would allow one to express in a purely formal manner the composition of any concept on the basis of a set of primitive concepts. This system of representation, in conjunction with a logical calculus for expressing identity and inclusion relations among concepts, would enable one to set forth a strictly demonstrative metaphysics.

Leibniz’s conception of an ideal metaphysics was incredibly ambitious. He made impressive progress on the project during his career, though he fell well short of attaining his lofty ideal. Some of Leibniz’s very early texts contain stretches of argument that are not carefully divided into axioms, definitions, propositions, and demonstrations, but which could be reconstructed to fit that model. In 1675–6 Leibniz wrote a number of unpublished papers and notes on metaphysical topics. These texts include definitions of key metaphysical concepts and many informal demonstrations of metaphysical propositions. In the late 1670’s Leibniz completed several short drafts of works that were divided into axioms, definitions, and propositions, although the subject matter of those works was not strictly metaphysical. In 1679, Leibniz quickly composed a work titled De Affectibus that was closer to the ideal of a demonstrative science of metaphysics than anything he had written to date. It contained a long list of definitions of key terms along with some demonstrations of metaphysical principles and theses. Leibniz’s project continued in the 1680’s in a series of extensive definitional studies of key concepts. By 1690, Leibniz had developed...

12. See e.g., (G 3:605; L:654) and (G 7:184–9; AG:5–10).
13. Leibniz did not think that metaphysics was the only area where a demonstrative science could be attained. He thought that the universal characteristic could be used in an ambitious reform of the encyclopedia of all the sciences. Leibniz’s early plans for the Demonstraciones Catholicae included logic, mathematics, physics, ethics, and politics in addition to metaphysics (A VI.i.494). On this point, see Antognazza, (2009:90–5).
14. Consider, for example, Leibniz’s unpublished 1672–3, Confessio Philosophi (The Confession of a Philosopher), Towards the beginning of this work, after providing definitions of “God,” “justice,” “love,” and “harmony,” he demonstrates that “happiness consists in the most harmonious state of mind” (A VI.iii.117; S:31). Leibniz then argues (in the voice of The Philosopher): If all happiness is harmonious (as demonstrated), and all harmony is known by God (by the definition of God), and all experience of harmony is a delight (by the definition of delight), it follows that all happiness is pleasing to God. Therefore (by the definition of love assumed previously) God loves everyone, and, accordingly (by the definition of the just) God is just (A VI.iii.117; S:31). Leibniz’s demonstration is slightly informal here (as one might expect in a dialogue), but it could easily be reconstructed in deductive form.
15. Most of these papers are included in Parkinson’s De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675–1676.
a logical calculus for expressing identity and inclusion relations among concepts. By this time, however, Leibniz had come to doubt whether it was possible to discover absolutely primitive concepts. He also did not succeed in developing his purely formal system of representation, the universal characteristic.

Without primitive concepts or the universal characteristic, it was not possible for Leibniz to attain his ideal of a fully demonstrative metaphysics. It is plausible to think that Leibniz could nevertheless have completed a work that was an approximation of the ideal, written in Latin and using non-primitive concepts. Leibniz insists throughout his later years that he could complete a work along these lines. In 1710, for example, he explains to correspondent Charles Hugon that in his (Leibniz's) recently published Essais de théodicée he set forth one part of his views “in an informal manner [an peu familiarem]” and that he is “thinking of [writing] a Latin work in which I will try to unfold my entire system” (G 3:680). And, in 1715, Leibniz writes to Biber: “if God will grant me more free time, I will attempt by means of well-formed demonstrations to impart to a good portion of my views the certainty of Euclid’s Elements” (LBr:64). But Leibniz never did unfold his entire system, even in this less ambitious form.

Leibniz’s account of the ideal form of metaphysics provides the basis for one of the ways that he distinguishes between the esoteric and the exoteric. In one of his earliest philosophical works, a very opinionated preface to an edition of a book by Marius Nizolius (1670), Leibniz distinguishes between esoteric (acroamaticus) and exoteric (exotericus) modes of philosophizing (philosophandi modus). In this text, which we will examine more closely later, he claims that the notion of demonstration provides the line of demarcation between the esoteric and exoteric modes. In the former “all things are demonstrated” while in the latter less rigorous forms of argumentation are utilized (e.g., supporting a proposition by means of an analogical argument) (A VI.ii.416). Works written in the exoteric mode, though useful in various respects, are “not most rigorous, not most exact” (ibid.). In this and other texts Leibniz equates the esoteric mode of philosophizing with the geometrical model of demonstration, as briefly described above.

3. Esoteric Content and The Problem of Esoteric Philosophy
The distinction between esoteric and exoteric modes of exposition is an important component of Leibniz’s views on the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric, but it is far from the whole story. In order for the account to be more complete it must be supplemented with a distinction between esoteric and exoteric content. An awareness of this important dimension of Leibniz’s account will begin to emerge if we consider the following question: why did Leibniz not make it a priority in his later years to compose a text that presented his metaphysics according to the esoteric mode of exposition? If he advocated the geometrical model of demonstration as the ideal form for metaphysics, and was fully capable of composing a work that was a close approximation of the ideal — as he claims on a number of occasions — would not composing such a text be a matter of great importance?

22. Rutherford presents Leibniz’s distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric as a distinction of form in his 1996 article. He briefly discusses this distinction again in Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature (281–2). In this book he claims that it is the “metaphysics of monads,” which many readers would find “absurd or unintelligible,” that gives rise to the need for discours exoterique (ibid., 282). These latter remarks are suggestive of what I call the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy (though I will characterize the problem more broadly so that it is not tied explicitly or exclusively to the theory of monads). Rutherford does not say anything about how his remarks in the book, which focus on the content of Leibniz’s philosophy, relate to his account in the 1996 article, which focuses on form exclusively. One of the important contributions of this paper is to clearly distinguish between esoteric and exoteric form and esoteric and exoteric content, and to provide an account of the relation between these two dimensions of Leibniz’s distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric.

23. This is not to say that his conception of a demonstrative metaphysics did not change in any respect throughout his career. See Lodge, (2010), who has
Leibniz often mentions his lack of free time as the reason for not completing an esoteric treatise (recall the previously quoted letter to Biber). But this seems to provide an incomplete explanation of the situation. Though his extra-philosophical duties were numerous and burdensome, he made the time to write quite a lot on metaphysical subjects. If he thought that the geometrical model of demonstration was indeed the ideal form for metaphysics, one cannot help but wonder why he did not find the time to begin composing such a work.

There were several additional factors that led Leibniz to compose works that were exoteric in mode of presentation. Consider the following remarks on the distinction between the exoteric and esoteric modes in his unpublished 1704 Nouveaux Essais sur l’entendement humain. The remarks occur in the context of a discussion of the precision (or lack thereof) in natural language:

[1] The ancients distinguished the ‘exoteric’ [exoterique] or popular mode of exposition [maniere d’ecrire] from the ‘esoteric’ [acroamatique] one which is suitable for those who are seriously concerned to discover the truth; and that distinction is relevant here. If anyone wants to write like a mathematician in metaphysics or moral philosophy there is nothing to prevent him from rigorously doing so; some have announced that they would do this, and have promised us mathematical demonstrations outside mathematics, but it is extremely seldom that anyone has succeeded. I believe that people are repelled by the amount of trouble they would have to take for a tiny number of readers: like the question in Persius, ‘Who will read this?, with its answer ‘Maybe a couple of people, maybe no one’. Yet I think that if anyone did go about it in the right way, he would have no reason to regret his labour. I have been tempted to try it myself (RB:260–1).

In this intriguing text, Leibniz (through the voice of Theophilus) notes that few people have tried to write in the esoteric mode, and even fewer (if any) have succeeded in the endeavor. He mentions several reasons that authors avoid esoteric expositions. Texts written in the esoteric mode are both difficult to compose and unlikely to attract readers, presumably because of their intimidating formal apparatus. And what is the point of writing a text that no one is going to read? This point is also emphasized by Leibniz in a 1705 letter to Burnett: “I never write anything in philosophy that I do not treat by definitions and axioms, though I do not always give it that mathematical air, which puts people off, for one must speak in a familiar manner [il faut parler familierelement] to be read by ordinary people” (G 3:302).

Although it poses a significant challenge, I do not think the “lack of readership problem” that Leibniz emphasizes in these texts is the central reason he avoids presenting his metaphysics in the esoteric mode. One can begin to glimpse a deeper reason in the Preface to the Nouveaux Essais. Consider these general remarks on the differences between his philosophy and the philosophy of Locke:

[2]…although the author of the Essay says hundreds of fine things which I applaud, our systems are very different. His is closer to Aristotle and mine to Plato, although each of us parts company at many points from the teachings of both of these ancient writers. He is more popular [populaire] whereas I am sometimes forced to be a little more esoteric [acroamatique] and abstract — which is no advantage for me, particularly when writing in a living language (RB:48).

In this text Leibniz is using the term “esoteric” in a subtly different way than he is in the other quote from the Nouveaux Essais. Whereas in the first text “esoteric” designated a mode of presenting one’s philosophy, in this text it concerns the content of one’s philosophy. Here he is drawing attention to the fact that the content of his philosophy is less “popular”
than Locke's. Locke's philosophy is popular in the sense that much of it accords with the deliverances of the senses and so-called 'common sense.' Leibniz's philosophy, in contrast, is often very abstract and far removed from ordinary opinions. This point is emphasized in a revealing 1702 letter to Sophie Charlotte, where he claims that "besides the sensible and the imaginable, there is that which is only intelligible, the object of the understanding alone" (G 6:501; AG:188; emphasis Leibniz). In his elaboration of the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible he writes:

[3]...what the ancient Platonists have remarked is very true, and very worthy of consideration, that the existence of intelligible things, and particularly of this I who thinks and is called mind or soul, is incomparably more certain than the existence of sensible things, and thus, that it would not be impossible, speaking with metaphysical rigor, that, at bottom, there should only be these intelligible substances, and that sensible things should only be appearances. However, our lack of attention lets us take sensible things for the only true things [G 6:502–3; AG:189].

Leibniz thinks that there is a significant gap between the way things are according to the true metaphysics and the way people generally take things to be. Many people uncritically assume that the only things that exist are things that can in some way be sensed. Leibniz, in contrast, thinks that at least some substances exist that can be understood through the pure intellect, but which cannot be sensed at all. Indeed, in this passage he concedes the possibility of an ontology consisting exclusively of intelligible substances (the extent to which he is willing to embrace such an ontology at this point in time is not clear from the passage). One can thus begin to see why Leibniz would take himself to be at a significant disadvantage when it comes to presenting his metaphysics to the general public. Readers are far more likely to find favor with a philosophy such as Locke's that is grounded in empiricist principles.24

In some of his other letters to trusted correspondents, Leibniz acknowledges the problem that he faces in even stronger terms. Consider, for example, what he writes to Pierre Bayle in 1702:

[4]...I should not be in too much of a hurry to publish what I have written, the point of which was only to provide some clarification for you, sir, and for some other people, so as to receive the same in return. For I write not so much to make an impression as to investigate the truth, which it is often useless, and even harmful, to publish — on account of the uninitiated [des profanes], who are incapable of appreciating it, and quite capable of taking it the wrong way (G 3:66–7; WF:127).

These are striking words. Read in isolation from his other remarks on the esoteric/exoteric distinction, one might take this text to suggest Russell's thesis that Leibniz had two distinct philosophies — a false philosophy suitable for presentation to the public, and his true philosophy, which he only revealed to a few trusted correspondents. But Leibniz's claim is not quite as radical as it might initially seem. His point is that it is often useless and harmful to straightforwardly present the content of his metaphysics to the public (and even to many of his correspondents). As he explains to Charles Hugony several years later, "some of my views cannot be presented in a straightforward manner [ne peut donner cruement], since people are liable to misunderstand them, not in relation to religion, which is strongly supported, but in relation to the senses" (6 November 1710, G 3:680). Similarly, in a letter to Simon Foucher from the late 1680's, Leibniz notes that some of the core concepts of metaphysics are those of "cause, effect, change, action, time, where I find that the truth is very different from what

24. See Nelson, (2007) and (2013) for more on this important general theme in the early modern period.
one imagines” (G 1:391). After setting forth several of his more controversial views he cautions Foucher as follows: “it is not appropriate for these sorts of considerations to be seen by everyone, and the vulgar would not be able to understand it at all before having the mind prepared” (G 1:392, emphasis added). All of these texts converge on the same basic problem. It has nothing to do with the esoteric mode of presentation per se. It is the esoteric content of Leibniz’s metaphysics — its purely intelligible concepts and principles — that make it susceptible to being seriously misunderstood. This is The Problem of Esoteric Philosophy.

4. The Primary Function of Exoteric Texts

How does Leibniz address the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy? His just quoted remark to Foucher about “preparing the mind” provides a clue. Additional clues can be found in some unpublished remarks appended to metaphysical notes that Leibniz wrote around 1676. Notes such as these must be approached with some caution. They were written very early in his career and never intended, so far as we can tell, for anyone’s eyes other than his own. Are they merely passing youthful thoughts or are they among the most revealing texts in the Leibnizian corpus? I think that the latter is closer to the truth, though this cannot be conclusively established. I have divided the text into several parts for ease of reference:

[5] [a] Metaphysics should be written with accurate definitions and demonstrations, [b] but nothing should be demonstrated in it that conflicts too much with received opinions [sententiae receptis]. For thus this metaphysics will be able to be received. [c] If it is once approved, then afterwards, if any examine it more profoundly, they will draw the necessary consequences themselves. [d] Besides this, one can, as a separate undertaking, show these people later the way of reasoning about these things. [e]

In this metaphysics, it will be useful for there to be added

Leibniz does not explicitly use the words “esoteric” or “exoteric” in this suggestive text, but it is plausible to think that this is the distinction he has in mind. [a] is a terse reference to the esoteric mode of presentation. Although this is the way that metaphysics should ideally be written, he claims in [b] that it would be a mistake to publish anything that “conflicts too much with received opinions.” This is a concern about the content of one’s metaphysics being at odds with received views. It is suggested, though not explicitly stated, that at least some of Leibniz’s own views do conflict significantly with received opinions. His remarks imply that if he were to set forth views that conflicted too much with received opinions then those views would be unlikely to be accepted. Leibniz does not explain why he thinks this in the present text. The view that he presents in some of the later texts that we have already examined is that this is because many people would regard such views as absurd, summarily reject them, or misunderstand them entirely — particularly if they concern purely intelligible things that cannot be known through the senses. In [b] Leibniz suggests a strategy of selective omission as a way of dealing with these problems. It is crucial to recognize that this is not done in order to permanently hide the controversial features of his metaphysics from the public. As [c] and [d] suggest, selective omission is part of a longer-term strategy of carefully preparing his readers to understand his most esoteric doctrines. In some cases he thinks that sympathetic readers who study his texts “more profoundly” will be able to infer the esoteric conclusions here and there the authoritative utterances of great men, who have reasoned in a similar way; especially when these utterances contain something that seems to have some possible relevance to the illustration of a view (A VI.iii:573; DSR:95).

25. I am grateful to Donald Rutherford for drawing my attention to this letter.

26. This text has been cited in the secondary literature by Mercer, (2001:11), Adams, (1994:52), and Antognazza, (2009:484). However, Adams and Antognazza only quote [a]–[c]. As we will see, the full import of the passage cannot be appreciated in the absence of [d] and [e].
Leibniz and the Art of Exoteric Writing

A number of Leibniz’s remarks in later texts confirm that he conceives of exoteric texts as important preparatory works. As Antognazza has shown, Leibniz conceived of the Essais de théodicée in precisely this way.20 He writes to Charles Hugony shortly after its publication:

[6] My essays on the goodness of God, the freedom of man, and the origin of evil have been printed in Holland, but I did not want to put my name on them. They are woven together from what I said and wrote at various times to the Queen of Prussia, who enjoyed reading M. Bayle and in whose company the difficulties that he raises on these matters were often discussed. I try to explain one part of my views in a rather informal manner [un peu familièrement]. As you know, some of my views cannot be presented in a straightforward manner [ne peut donner crurement], since people are liable to misunderstand them, not in relation to religion, which is strongly supported, but in relation to the senses. I am therefore thinking of [writing] a Latin work in which I will try to unfold my entire system (6 November 1710, G 3:680).31

27. Leibniz’s account of the function of exoteric texts, on my reading, is very similar to the fifth reason Maimonides cites for an author to introduce seemingly contradictory or contrary statements into a text: “The fifth cause arises from the necessity of teaching and making someone understand. For there may be a certain obscure matter that is difficult to conceive...The teacher...will have to be lax and, using any means that occur to him or gross speculation, will try to make that first matter somehow understood. He will not undertake to state the matter as it truly is in exact terms, but rather will leave it so in accord with the listener’s imagination that the latter will understand only what he now wants him to understand. Afterwards, in the appropriate place, that obscure matter is stated in exact terms and explained as it truly is” (1963:17–18). Maimonides claims that this strategy is used “in the books of the philosophers,” and says that he uses this strategy himself in the Guide of the Perplexed (1963:20). We know that Leibniz read the Guide and thought highly of it. In his marginal comments on the work he describes it as “quite remarkable and more philosophical than I had supposed. It deserves careful reading” (Fouché de Careil 1861; translation Lenn Goodman). He did not, however, leave any marginal comments on the introduction to the Guide where Maimonides discusses the esoteric/esoteric distinction.


29. Mercer has provided a detailed and insightful interpretation of Leibniz’s rhetorical strategies that emphasizes the pedagogical character of Leibniz’s writing. She summarizes her view as follows: “The Rhetoric of Attraction attempts to engage the sectarian reader by using agreeable philosophical terminology and by extolling the virtues of the reader’s sect while attracting attention to the virtues of other philosophical schools; ultimately the goal is to entice the reader to consider the underlying (and usually unstated) assumptions, which Leibniz considers to be true and which he thinks will eventually lead the reader to philosophical enlightenment and intellectual peace” (2001:57). I completely agree with Mercer that Leibniz’s rhetorical strategies are subtle, and that he intends to “nudge and not push people in the direction of the truth” (ibid, 55). However, I think that Leibniz’s pedagogical rhetorical aims need to be understood within the context of his distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric. Also, while I agree that sometimes Leibniz engages
Consider also what Leibniz writes to Fontenelle in 1704:

[7] The true metaphysics, or philosophy, if you will, does not appear to me any less important than geometry, especially if there is also a way of introducing into it demonstrations, which until now have been entirely excluded from it, along with the calculus that will be necessary in order to give them all the entry they need. However, it is necessary to prepare readers with exoteric writings. The journals have served me well until now (FC 1:234).

Here, Leibniz explicitly claims that his choice to present various features of his philosophy in journal articles should be understood as part of a broad exoteric strategy to prepare his readers to understand the "true metaphysics." This helps shed light on some of Leibniz's better-known remarks about the composition of his journal articles. Leibniz writes the following to correspondent Nicolas Remond in 1714:

\[\text{[8] In the Leipzig journal [Acta Eruditorum]}\]

I adapt myself more to the style of Cartesians, and in this latest piece I try to express myself in a way that could be understood by those who are not yet very accustomed to the style of one or the other (G 3:624).

Leibniz’s strategy of adapting himself to the language of the schools in some articles and to the language of the Cartesians in others is one of his core exoteric strategies. He thinks that using language that is familiar with his readers is a good way to make his views seem not too far removed from received opinions.\(^{32}\) This is not merely a feature of his published writings. Leibniz tailors his writings in a similar way in his private correspondences. For example, in his correspondence with Jesuit theologian Bartholomew Des Bosses he frequently employs scholastic terminology, and in his correspondence with (largely) Cartesian physicist Burcher De Volder he sometimes presents his views with a Cartesian slant. To use a more concrete example, early in the correspondence with De Volder, Leibniz appeals to the doctrine of continued divine creation, which he (Leibniz) regards as a central Cartesian tenet. As I have argued elsewhere, although he initially presents the doctrine in a way that makes it seem like this is a point of common ground between him and the Cartesians, it emerges later in the correspondence that Leibniz only affirms the doctrine in a qualified sense.\(^{33}\) The general strategy here is to use language that is familiar to the reader or correspondent and to emphasize initial points

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32. Pauline Phemister highlights Leibniz’s strategy of familiar language, though she does not relate this strategy to the esoteric/exoteric distinction (2005:15). She draws on Leibniz’s revealing 1698 remarks to Johann Bernoulli where he agrees with Bernoulli that he should ‘abstain from mentioning primary matter and substantial form, and be content with mentioning mass per se passive, and entelechy or primitive activity, soul, life’ in works directed at the Cartesians (G 3:552; AG:169).

of agreement. Fine-grained differences and esoteric implications are typically avoided at the initial stages of engagement.34

One important general point that emerges from Leibniz’s remarks in the letter to Remond is that there is more than one set of “received opinions” that he needs to take into account in composing exoteric texts. The received opinions of a Cartesian and the opinions of someone who is committed to a version of Aristotelian Scholasticism differ in fundamental respects. In the letter cited above Leibniz speaks of another of his works, the Principe de la Nature et de la Grace, fondés en raison, which targets yet another audience — those who are not accustomed to the style of the Cartesians or the scholastics. When it comes to exoteric philosophy, one size does not fit all. Different strategies are required for people with different backgrounds and views.35

Texts like [7] and [8] also show why it is important to distinguish The Problem of Audience Reception from the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy. Although received opinions that are grounded in sensory-prejudices present the biggest challenge, all received opinions that diverge from Leibniz’s own present formidable barriers for the understanding (and hopeful acceptance) of his views. Exoteric strategies like familiar language can be used to address both problems.

We must briefly take notice of another exoteric strategy that Leibniz uses to address both problems. Leibniz’s use of familiar language is often accompanied by laudatory references to various modern, medieval, and ancient figures. In thinking about the significance of these references it is important to recall the final sentence in the long quotation from Leibniz’s 1676 notes: “In this metaphysics, it will be useful for there to be added here and there the authoritative utterances of great men, who have reasoned in a similar way; especially when these utterances contain something that seems to have some possible relevance to the illustration of a view” (A VI.iii:573; DSR:95). Appealing to similarities between his views and those of his predecessors is one of Leibniz’s strategies for presenting his philosophy in a way that makes it seem not too far removed from received opinions. If this is true then Leibniz’s favorable references to particular figures along with his oft-cited proclamations concerning the continuity of his thought and the thought of his philosophical forebears need to be treated with great care.37 His laudatory remarks can mask subtle or not so subtle differences between their respective views. Nuanced differences and radical implications may be left implicit or omitted entirely in his more exoteric works.

We are now well placed to more carefully mark the distinction between esoteric/exoteric mode of presentation and esoteric/exoteric content. We have seen that Leibniz’s ultimate aim was to present his metaphysics (and his philosophy more generally) according to the esoteric mode. It would enable him to present his views in a systematic, clear, and unambiguous manner, and it would enable him to provide

34. It is not always easy to determine when Leibniz is using familiar language as an exoteric strategy. In some cases his decision not to provide clear definitions of the terms he uses might be due to his not having worked out some of the details of his own view. I will return to this issue at the end of the paper.

35. David Cunning has suggested that Descartes was keenly aware of the problem of presenting his metaphysics to people from different philosophical backgrounds. He argues that Descartes carefully crafted his Meditations in a way that would allow it to effectively engage people from different traditions (2010).

36. His disagreements with Malebranche and his followers over the nature of God and the ontological status of ideas involve differing views about matters that they take to be purely intelligible. For some of Leibniz’s criticisms of Malebranche, see Discours 3, A VI.iv:b:1533–4; AG:36–7 and Discours 29, A VI.iv:b:1574; AG:60.

37. Consider, for example, this well-known passage from a 1714 letter to Remond: “I have tried to uncover and unite the truth buried and scattered under the opinions of all the philosophical sects, and I believe I have added something of my own that takes a few steps forward...most sects are right in a good part of what they propose, but not so much in what they deny” (10 Jan 1714, G 3:606–7; L:654–5). Texts such as this have led some commentators to claim that Leibniz is an eclectic philosopher. Mercer has developed this position in impressive detail (2001:3–62). Although I find much that is convincing in Mercer’s sophisticated account of Leibniz’s “conciliatory eclecticism,” I think she overemphasizes the extent of his eclecticism. Although I do not have the space to defend this thesis in the present paper, I think that in a number of cases Leibniz develops distinctive philosophical views and then seeks out similar ideas in his predecessors as a strategy for presenting his views to his correspondents and to the public. Scheers makes a similar point about Leibniz’s purported eclecticism (2008:33).
rigorous demonstrations of his various theses. But he thought that it would be a mistake to introduce readers to his philosophy with a text written in the esoteric mode. This had very little to do with the esoteric mode itself; the central problem stemmed from the esoteric content of his metaphysics — its purely intelligible concepts and principles. In an effort to overcome The Problem of Audience Reception and The Problem of Esoteric Philosophy Leibniz composed exoteric texts. In these texts he used a variety of rhetorical techniques to partly reveal and partly conceal his views in a manner that would enable his readers to attain a partial understanding of his views, and to prepare them for a more rigorous presentation — a text written according to the esoteric mode. Given that Leibniz never completed a work that was written according to the esoteric mode (or even a close approximation), the only way we can usefully classify texts as esoteric or exoteric is based on the extent to which they reveal the esoteric content of his metaphysics. This is not a simple dichotomy, but rather a matter of degree. Approached from this perspective, one will find that while many portions of a text are exoteric it also contains “esoteric moments” — passages where Leibniz lays his metaphysical cards on the table, as it were. Attempting to tease apart the exoteric and esoteric features of texts is thus a matter of great importance, but it is by no means an easy task. I will say more about how this can be done later in the paper once a more complete list of Leibniz’s exoteric strategies has been provided.

5. Hypothesis, Metaphor, and Analogy

We have seen that the primary function of exoteric texts is to serve as intellectual stepping-stones that bridge the gulf between received opinions and esoteric truth. Leibniz utilizes a wide range of strategies in his exoteric works, some of which we have already discussed. Several additional core strategies deserve mention as well. Let us begin by returning to Leibniz’s remarks on the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric in the 1670 Preface to Nizolius:

[9] There is... a vast difference between modes of philosophizing [philosophandi modus], for one is, if I may so speak, esoteric [acroamaticus], another is exoteric [exotericus]. The esoteric mode is that in which all things are demonstrated; the exoteric is that in which some things are said without demonstration, but they are still given confirmation by means of certain similarities and by dialectical arguments, or even by arguments based on definition, but not proposed except dialectically, [and] they are illustrated by examples and likenesses. Such a kind of speaking is indeed dogmatic or philosophical; however, it is not esoteric, that is, not most rigorous, not most exact (A VI.ii.416).

One point that I take Leibniz to be making here is that in exoteric contexts propositions can be treated as hypotheses rather than providing rigorous demonstrations of them. He seems to think that in certain cases his readers will be less hostile to a novel thesis if it is presented as a hypothesis than if it is presented as a thesis that can be demonstrated from metaphysical principles.38

In the Preface to Nizolius Leibniz claims that propositions that are presented hypothetically can be motivated and illustrated by examples, analogies, metaphors, and stories.39 Although these are exoteric devices, he does not claim that they have no place in esoteric works. An esoteric work can include analogies and metaphors, which give a

38. One place where Leibniz appears to be using this strategy is in the Système nouveau. In this work, he presents the theory of concomitance (or pre-established harmony) as a hypothesis, and defends it through a range of a posteriori considerations (e.g., its ability to resolve the problem of mind-body interaction). As Stuart Brown has noted, Leibniz’s remarks to some of his correspondents suggest that this was a tactical choice, and that he was capable of providing more rigorous demonstrations of his views (1996:51–2). See the 3 July 1694 letter to Bossuet (A I.x.134) and the postscript to a March 1697 letter to Gilles Des Billettes (A I.xiii.657). Rutherford emphasizes this point as well (1996:185–7).

pleasing respite to a weary soul, so long as they are carefully distinguished from the rigorous demonstrations that form the core of the work.40 Leibniz notes that this difference is also observed in mathematics where demonstrations, which are rigorous and exact, are carefully distinguished from scholia in which reasoning can be treated in a more familiar manner.

In the Preface to Nizolius, Leibniz focuses on the distinction between modes of exposition, but his remarks on analogies, metaphors, and stories bear on the distinction between esoteric and exoteric content as well. Passages that involve analogies, metaphors, and stories are exoteric in mode of presentation and content. What is the point of utilizing such devices if they do not provide rigorous descriptions of the content of Leibniz's metaphysics? Recall the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy. As he states in text [6], Leibniz thinks his philosophy is most likely to be misunderstood in relation to the senses. The tendency people have to rely on a sensory-based theory of knowledge hinders them from achieving a proper understanding of many of Leibniz's core concepts, doctrines, and principles, which can only be adequately grasped through the intellect, not through the senses or the imagination.41 One of Leibniz's main exoteric strategies for dealing with this situation is to utilize *sensible* analogies, *imaginative* metaphors, anecdotes, and stories to introduce and motivate his abstract concepts, principles, and theses. Such metaphors and analogies enable his readers to attain an introductory understanding of the content of his metaphysics.42

6. The Paradoxical Nature of Exoteric Writing

One might worry that there is something paradoxical about certain of the exoteric strategies that I have attributed to Leibniz. As we have seen, Leibniz thought that people were prone to misunderstand certain aspects of his philosophy. Leibniz sought to avoid these misunderstandings by presenting his philosophy in an exoteric manner. But surely some of his exoteric strategies themselves would have been likely to result in a misunderstanding of his views. A number of his readers would be likely to take his metaphors and analogies too literally, for example. Or, they would simply assume that Leibniz was using key terminology in the same way that they did when he utilizes the exoteric strategy of familiar language. Does it really make sense to suggest that Leibniz sought to avoid misunderstandings by presenting his philosophy in ways that were liable to give rise to misunderstandings? I think it does. Leibniz thought that some misunderstandings would typically be followed by the immediate rejection of his philosophy. These were the misunderstandings that he was deeply

40. A VII.ii.416–7. This point is emphasized by Schepers (2008:23–4). See also Rutherford, (2005). I agree with most of Rutherford's perceptive analysis of the function of metaphors in Leibniz's philosophy but I am not convinced that metaphor is ineliminable from metaphysical discourse.

41. See the previously discussed letter to Sophie Charlotte G 6:501; AG:188 and Leibniz's remarks on force in De Ipsa Natura G 4:507; AG:159.

42. It is striking to look at a text like the *Monadologie* while keeping this account of the role of analogies and metaphors in mind. This text, which has traditionally been taken to be one of the more definitive statements of Leibniz's metaphysics, contains numerous exoteric features. It is replete with analogies, metaphors, and forms of argumentation that fall well short of a strictly esoteric presentation of the content of Leibniz's philosophy. But

Leibniz does not explicitly flag the exoteric features of this work as being exoteric. It is thus easy to mistake exoteric illustration for esoteric presentation or demonstration. For example, in explaining the thesis that there is no inter-substantial causation between finite substances in the *Monadologie*, Leibniz famously says: 'monads have no windows through which something can enter or leave' (G 6:607; AG:214). This metaphor of being "windowless" helps the reader attain some understanding of Leibniz’s thesis, but it will be an imperfect understanding to the extent that it involves conceiving of monads as being extended. Leibniz also frequently uses imaginative metaphors to describe God’s sustenance of finite substances. Late in the *Monadologie*, for example, he writes: "all created or derivative monads are generated, so to speak, by continual fulgurations of the divinity from moment to moment" (G 6:614; AG:219) And in the *Essais de théodicée* Leibniz uses the analogy of a heavy-laden boat travelling down a river to explain how God and finite substances can be said to co-operate in the production of particular effects in the ordinary course of nature (H:30–1). Both the metaphor and the analogy provide useful but imperfect devices for conceiving of things that cannot be sensed or imagined, strictly speaking. In reading Leibniz’s texts it is important to recognize that these are only metaphors and analogies — they are not meant to provide metaphysically rigorous descriptions of divine action. For more on the heavy-laden boat analogy, see Whipple, (2015:208–11). For a dissenting view, see Antognazza, (forthcoming), who argues that Leibniz’s example of the heavy-laden boat is more than a mere analogy.
concerned to avoid. Other misunderstandings could be pedagogically useful to the extent that they enabled his readers to attain a preliminary (though over-simplified) grasp of his views or prevented them from falling victim to the more serious forms of misunderstanding. These less pernicious misunderstandings could be corrected in more advanced texts (or through a more careful reading of the text in question, in some cases).

Let me provide a brief illustration of this rather abstract point. The interpretive hypothesis I present will be controversial, and it will not be possible to fully defend it here (that would require a full paper at least). My much more limited aim is to illustrate how there can be different sorts of misunderstandings, and to show how approaching texts with an awareness of Leibniz’s views on the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric can allow one to see interpretive possibilities that would otherwise likely be missed.

Leibniz has often been read as endorsing a form of idealism in his later years. In what follows I will take this as a working interpretive hypothesis. This theory maintains, roughly, that the only true substances are immaterial mind-like entities that possess the properties of perception and appetite. Leibniz was keenly aware that this theory was far removed from the received opinions of his day. As he explained to Jesuit theologian Bartholomew Des Bosses, for example:

[10]...it is another question whether bodies are substances. For even if bodies were not substances, nonetheless all men will be inclined to judge that bodies are substances, just as they are all inclined to judge that the Earth is at rest, even though it is really in motion (19 August 1715, LR:347).

Leibniz took the view that bodies are substances to be one of the most deeply entrenched beliefs of his time. In presenting his theory of simple substances, he was concerned to avoid the following fundamental misunderstanding: if the only true substances are unextended simples, then bodies must be mere illusions. Leibniz recognized that such a view would seem utterly absurd to most of his readers given their commitment to the substantiality of bodies. They would think that no philosophy according to which bodies are mere illusions deserves to be taken seriously.

Leibniz himself did not think that bodies are mere illusions, even from the perspective of the theory of simple substances. His view of bodies is, roughly, that they are well-founded phenomena (phaenomena bene fundata/phénomènes bien fondés). To adequately grasp Leibniz’s view one must understand that his ontology involves different levels or degrees of reality. Simplifying things considerably, these degrees range from the ideal (the least real), to the phenomenal, to the most fundamental level of simple substances. Bodies fall within the purview of the phenomenal: as entia semimentalia they are more real than entities that are purely ideal (e.g., space) but less real than simple substances. Bodies are accorded an enhanced degree of reality (in comparison to merely ideal entities) because they are well-founded on the reality of simple substances. The precise nature of this “well founding” — and of Leibniz’s ontological scheme more generally — is a complicated and difficult matter.

The nuanced framework (however one might fill in the details) does not lend itself to a straightforward and intuitive presentation. A reader who did not adequately grasp the framework would be likely to focus on the description of bodies as phemenona, and jump to the conclusion that bodies are mere illusions (their bene fundata status notwithstanding).

43. The question of whether Leibniz is a consistent idealist in his later years is highly disputed in Leibniz scholarship. For two classic idealist interpretations see Adams, (1994:262–307) and Rutherford, (1995:265–82). For two important dissenting views see Garber, (2009) and Phemister, (2005). See also Look, (1999) and McDonough, (2013). I think that careful attention to Leibniz’s views on exoteric writing can provide additional support for an idealist reading of Leibniz.

45. AG 2:306.
I would like to suggest, as an interpretive hypothesis, that Leibniz seeks to avoid the “bodies are illusions” misunderstanding in some texts by presenting an oversimplified account of the relation between bodies and simple substances. In texts like the Monadologie, for example, Leibniz omits any characterization of bodies as *phaenomena bene fundata*. Instead he merely speaks of bodies as “composites [composès].” They are contrasted with simple substances, which he describes as having no parts. He claims that there must be simple substances because a composite is just a “collection [recueil]” or “aggregate [aggregatum]” of simples. Leibniz does not explain how he is using these terms. In the absence of further elaboration a reader is likely to think that the relation between simples and composites is that of part and whole. Strictly speaking, Leibniz does not think that the relation between simples and bodies is a part/whole relation. Leibniz tells De Volder, for example, that “properly speaking, matter isn’t composed of constitutive unities, but results from them…substantial unities aren’t really parts, but the foundations of phenomena” (G 2:268; AG:179). As he explains elsewhere, a part of a whole must be “of the same sort” as the whole. Simple substances and bodies are not of the same sort because only the latter are extended.

But even if simple substances do not compose bodies as parts, thinking about their relation in this way can be pedagogically useful insofar as it conveys the idea that bodies are ontologically dependent on the more fundamental reality of simple substances. Crucially, by omitting the characterization of bodies as *phaenomena bene fundata*, the idea is conveyed in a way that is less likely to give rise to the thought that bodies might be mere illusions. Presenting the theory of simple substances in a manner that does not directly challenge his reader’s likely commitment to the reality of bodies can be viewed as an attempt to introduce his theory without making it seem too far removed from received opinions. The reader will thus be more favorably disposed to the theory, and more likely to take seriously other aspects of the theory that are presented in the remainder of the texts. Leibniz is thus willing to risk certain minor misunderstandings of his theory in an effort to effectively introduce it to readers in a way that does not engender major misunderstandings, particularly those that would lead to its swift rejection. A more rigorous account of the relation between monads and bodies, and of the precise ontological status of bodies, could be provided in a supplementary work.

On the reading that I have suggested Leibniz is utilizing a number of complimentary exoteric strategies in his initial accounts of the relation between bodies and simple substances in the Monadologie. First, he is using the strategy of selective omission when he makes no reference whatsoever to bodies as *phaenomena bene fundata*. He is using the strategy of familiar language when he speaks of “composès,” “recueil,” and “aggregatum” without providing the reader with clear definitions of these terms. These first two strategies are closely related. If Leibniz had set forth his technical account of an aggregatum, for example, it would have been difficult for him to omit the thesis that bodies are *phaenomena bene fundata*. For Leibniz, no aggregatum can exist unless

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47. This also occurs in *Principes de la Nature et de la Grace* (G 6:598; AG:207). Ruth-erford has argued that Leibniz’s initial characterization of composites as *substances in the Principes is a feature of Leibniz’s discours éxoterique* (1995:281–2). See also Lamarra, (2009:19), who has suggested that Leibniz chose not to emphasize the theory of simple substances in the *Essais de théodicée* as part of a “rhetorical strategy.”

48. G 6:598; AG:207, and G 6:607; AG:213. These initial remarks in the Monadologie have often been interpreted as containing one of Leibniz’s core arguments for the theory of simple substances. See Levey, (2012) and Rutherford, (2008) for recent discussions of how to understand this and other arguments for the theory of simple substances. In future work I plan to engage their readings of these passages. At present I will only say that I am not denying that Leibniz might have had a fully demonstrative grounding argument for the existence of simple substances, or that he wanted the fully demonstrative argument to be consistent with the versions of the argument that are presented in texts like the Monadologie. I do, however, think that Leibniz omits too many essential distinctions and details for even a very discerning reader to be able to reconstruct a demonstrative argument merely on the basis of these texts.

there is a mind that perceives at least two individuals as constituting one thing. The individuals, without a mind perceiving them as one thing, are not an *aggregatum*, strictly speaking. The semi-mental character of an *aggregatum* is one of the things that allows Leibniz (in other contexts) to argue directly from the thesis that bodies are *aggregata* to the thesis that bodies are *bene fundata phaenomena*.  

The exoteric strategy of surface reading vs. deep reading is also utilized in the *Monadologie*. While Leibniz must have been aware that his brief remarks on the relation between simple substances and composites in the opening sections of this text would be likely to engender minor misunderstandings, the remarks are also compatible with Leibniz’s nuanced account of the ontological status of body and the relation between bodies and simple substances. It is nevertheless unlikely that even a very skilled reader (in the absence of other texts) would be able to infer many features of Leibniz’s nuanced account on the basis of these sparse remarks. It is unclear, for example, how a reader could infer Leibniz’s technical notion of an *aggregatum* from his undefined use of this term. But it is reasonable to think that an attentive reader would be able to move beyond, or at least question, the surface part/whole reading of the simple substance/body relation. The reader could ask, for example, how entities that are unextended could literally compose entities that are extended. The reader might thus infer that while simples are supposed to provide an ontological ground for bodies, they do not literally compose bodies on the model of part and whole. Having digested some of the central lessons of the *Monadologie*, such a reader might be sufficiently prepared to appreciate a more rigorous presentation of Leibniz’s ontological scheme. It is thus reasonable to think that the *Monadologie*, like Leibniz’s journal articles and the *Essais de Théodicée*, is conceived as a work that would help prepare his readers for a more rigorous presentation of his views.

Before closing this section, it is worth pointing out that even some of Leibniz’s more acute correspondents fell victim to the “bodies are illusions” misunderstanding. For example, nearly six years into his extensive correspondence with De Volder, Leibniz provides him with a fairly detailed account of his ontological framework, which includes a clear affirmation of the theory of simple substances along with the claim that bodies are well-founded phenomena. In his response De Volder complains of seeing many “entirely new and unexpected things” in Leibniz’s latest letter (G 2:272; PL:313). He tells Leibniz: “you completely eliminate [plane tollere] bodies” by placing them “only in appearances” (ibid). In response Leibniz explains in some detail how he does not “eliminate body” but reduces it to what it is (G 2:275; AG:181). The details of Leibniz’s more nuanced account of the reality of bodies need not concern us here. It is more important, I think, to note the way that Leibniz prefaces his response:

[11] You say that you noticed many surprising things in my most recent letters. But you will perhaps observe that the same views had already been suggested in previous letters, and only prejudice has prevented you from coming to this point some time ago and at long last stopping your search for substances and for the source of forces where it isn’t to be found. And so, I was forced to impress certain of my views on you more explicitly, and to respond, if not

50. Leibniz did not, as far as we are aware, actually show the *Monadologie* to anyone during his lifetime. This is not unusual for him. He composed a number of essays with an eye towards possible publication, which he did not ultimately publish or distribute very widely (if at all). Most of these texts contain numerous exoteric features, in my opinion. I think that part of the reason for Leibniz’s reluctance to publish or distribute many of these works is that he was uncertain about how effective his exoteric strategies would be.


52. The idea that Leibniz does have considered views on these issues has been challenged in the secondary literature. See Garber, (2009).

53. 30 June 1704, PL:301–11.

54. For an illuminating account of Leibniz’s correspondence with De Volder, see Lodge’s introduction to his recent translation of their letters.
Leibniz’s revealing confession in this passage drives home several of the central theses I have been defending in this essay. First, the passage clearly shows that Leibniz was writing exoterically in his earlier letters to De Volder, that is, he was partly revealing and partly concealing his views in an effort to introduce De Volder to the esoteric content of his metaphysics. It is also clear that The Problem of Esoteric Philosophy is what necessitates Leibniz’s exoteric approach. De Volder’s sensory-based prejudice about the substantiality of bodies made it extremely difficult for him to understand how the world of bodies and corporeal forces could be grounded in a more fundamental reality — the purely intelligible realm of simple substances and their primitive forces. Leibniz’s strategy for engaging De Volder was to focus on the inadequacies of De Volder’s view and to gradually reveal his own views. He hoped that through gentle prodding De Volder would come to see the truth of the theory of simple substances. When Leibniz finally presented the theory in no uncertain terms De Volder misunderstood the view and rejected it. It is likely that interactions such as this led Leibniz to redouble his efforts to find pedagogically effective ways to introduce people to the theory of simple substances.

56. Leibniz’s remarks are ambiguous with respect to which “previous letters” he is referencing. Further argument would be required to make the case that Leibniz was committed to the theory of monads throughout the entire correspondence.


58. Rutherford has shown that a similar dialectical trajectory can be discerned in Leibniz’s correspondence with Wolff (2004), though he does not explain the trajectory in terms of the esoteric/exoteric distinction. Part of the reason for this, I believe, is that Rutherford is not working with a conception of Leibniz’s exoteric writing where exoteric writings serve as intellectual stepping-stones that can help prepare a reader to appreciate the esoteric content of Leibniz’s philosophy.

59. For an illuminating account of Leibniz’s early metaphysics, see Mercer, (2001).

7. Conclusion

It is time to summarize my account of Leibniz’s distinction between esoteric and exoteric philosophy. I will use two possible objections as springboards for the summary. Here is the first: “You have been moving back and forth between texts written as early as 1670 and as late as 1715. You seem to be uncritically assuming that Leibniz’s views on the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric did not change over a very long period of time. Surely you do not think that Leibniz’s metaphysics is fully in place in 1670 and endures unchanged until his death in 1716?”

In response: I do not think that Leibniz’s metaphysics is fully in place in 1670. I also agree that one should not assume that Leibniz’s views on esoteric and exoteric philosophy did not change over the course of his career. That being said, when one brings Leibniz’s dispersed remarks on the esoteric/exoteric distinction together, as I have done in this paper, it is striking how complimentary they are. On the interpretation that I favor Leibniz has a sophisticated account of the distinction between esoteric and exoteric modes of presentation in place by 1670, well before many of the central tenets of his philosophy are in place. He endorsed the esoteric mode, which was modeled closely on the geometrical model of demonstration, as the ideal mode of presentation. Although he continued to regard some version of the geometrical model as the ideal mode throughout his career, he thought it would be a mistake to introduce his metaphysics to people in the form of an esoteric treatise. This is not due to a problem with the esoteric mode per se. The problem stems from the gap between the esoteric content of Leibniz’s metaphysics and what he took to be the received views of his time. Although the content of his philosophy did change in important ways over the course of his career it always contained features that were far removed from received opinions. He thought that if he were to present the content of his metaphysics in a straightforward manner people would be likely to misunder-
stand it and summarily reject it. Leibniz was aware of The Problem of Audience Reception early in his career, at least by 1676. In later texts, he placed increased emphasis on received opinions that were grounded on sensory prejudices. This misguided reliance on sensory-based beliefs made it extremely difficult for people to conceive of purely intelligible concepts and principles and to recognize the existence of purely intelligible things that could not be sensed or imagined.

Leibniz conceived of exoteric texts as a central part of his response to the Problem of Audience Reception and the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy. They were designed to serve as intellectual stepping-stones that could help readers move from received opinions to esoteric truth. We have seen that Leibniz utilized several general strategies when he writes exoterically:

(a) Selective omission and supplementation: he omits the features of his philosophy that are furthest removed from received opinions. In some cases it is possible to infer the omitted views from a careful reading of the exoteric text; in other cases a supplementary work is required.

(b) Surface reading vs. deep reading: the text admits of an intuitive surface reading that can make his views seem closer to received opinions than they actually are. The texts are typically compatible with a more rigorous but less straightforward reading; it may or may not be possible to grasp the deeper meaning on the basis of the exoteric text alone.

(c) Familiar language: he tailors his language to his audience so that it will appear more familiar to them.

60. Some of Leibniz’s remarks in a letter to Magnus Wedderkopf suggest that was aware of this problem as early as 1671. After setting forth his views on necessity, freedom, and a few difficult theodicean issues, he wrote: “But these remarks are for you; I do not wish them made public. For not even the most proper remarks are understood by everyone” (1671 letter to Wedderkopf, A II.1.118; S:4–5).

(d) Eclectic reference: he appeals to the claims of well-regarded historical and contemporary figures to illustrate and motivate his own theses.

(e) Hypothesis: he presents a thesis as a hypothesis rather than providing a strict demonstration of the thesis, even if he is capable of providing the demonstration. He thinks that a reader will be less hostile to a novel thesis if it is presented in this way.

(f) Sensible analogies, metaphors, imaginative thought experiments, stories, and anecdotes: he utilizes these devices because they allow readers that are accustomed to conceiving of things by means of the senses and the imagination to attain an introductory understanding of theses and principles that are abstract and distinctly conceivable only through the intellect (not the senses or the imagination).

Conceiving of these strategies in the abstract is one thing; utilizing them in specific contexts is quite another. One of the significant challenges that Leibniz faced in attempting to do this was the diversity of received opinions present in early modern Europe. What was familiar language to a Cartesian or Malebranchean was often not familiar to an Aristotelian or a follower of Locke. And Leibniz was well aware that people from different backgrounds would find different parts of his metaphysics appealing and different parts repugnant. He recognized that if he presented his system in its entirety people would focus their attention on the parts that they found repugnant.61 I believe that this

61. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the way that Antoine Arnauld responded when he read the section headings of Leibniz’s Discours de métaphysique. Arnauld wrote: “I find in these thoughts so many things which alarm me and which almost all men, if I am not mistaken, will find so shocking, that I do not see of what use a writing can be, which apparently all the world will reject” (G 2:15). Arnauld singled out the complete concept theory of substance, which he took to imply a “more than fatal necessity” that would undermine the very possibility of human freedom. It is likely that Arnauld’s reaction to the section headings was one of the things that led Leibniz to never publish that text. It also likely informed the way he presented his
is one of the reasons Leibniz spent so much time in correspondence with leading intellectuals over the course of his career. It also helps to explain why Leibniz chose to publish in scholarly journals. In both of these settings he could more effectively communicate his views by tailoring his texts to a particular audience. Leibniz thought that by initially highlighting points of agreement and features of his metaphysics that an audience would find attractive they would then be favorably disposed to the more controversial features of his system.  

Let me turn now to the second possible objection: “You claim that awareness of Leibniz’s distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric can help one distinguish the esoteric and exoteric features of particular texts. But in attempting to do this one has to assume that a certain view is part of the esoteric content of Leibniz’s philosophy and then read seemingly opposed texts as exoteric. One could just as well assume that what you are taking to be exoteric is actually esoteric, and then read what you take to be esoteric as exoteric. The esoteric/exoteric distinction can thus be used to justify any interpretation whatsoever.”  

In response: it is true that teasing apart the esoteric and exoteric features of Leibniz’s writings is difficult given the largely implicit nature of exoteric writing. However, the account I have presented by no means implies that the esoteric/exoteric distinction can be plausibly used to defend any interpretation whatsoever. In order to provide a principled esoteric/exoteric interpretation of the sort I am advocating one must (a) approach the relevant texts with an awareness of the Problem of Audience Reception and the Problem of Esoteric Philosophy, (b) approach the texts with an awareness of the primary function of exoteric texts, (c) approach the texts with an awareness of the various strategies that Leibniz deploys when he writes exoterically, (d) look at other texts where Leibniz discusses the same issue, and (e) locate passages where Leibniz (or one of his interlocutors) suggests that one of his views is far removed from received opinions or is likely to be misunderstood. One must also pay close attention to the linguistic clues that Leibniz sometimes uses to indicate an esoteric or exoteric context. For example, his use of prefatory remarks such as “à la rigueur metaphysique,” “dans la precision metaphysique,” and “in metaphysico rigore,” can indicate an exoteric context, while qualifications like “pour ainsi dire” and “neque male docetur” can indicate an esoteric context.  

62. This reading is similar but in an important way different from Garber’s explanation of why Leibniz was drawn to the journal article format. Garber claims that Leibniz’s philosophy is “modular” in the sense that he thought that other people could accept certain of his views without having to accept other of his views. For example, he thought that his readers could accept his solution to the problem of evil without endorsing the theory of monads. Given that the different “parts” of his philosophy are detachable it makes more sense to present them piecemeal in journal articles than in a comprehensive treatise (Garber, 2014). I do not think that Leibniz thought his philosophy was modular in this sense. On my view, Leibniz presents his views piecemeal because it is a more effective strategy for introducing readers to certain parts of his system that they are likely to find attractive. In discussing this issue, it is important to keep in mind that Leibniz explicitly describes his journal articles as exoteric works that were designed to prepare his readers for a comprehensive presentation of his philosophical system. See FC 1:234.  

63. I thank Daniel Garber for asking me to address this objection.

64. Robert Sleigh has suggested that one important clue for recognizing when Leibniz is “ready to lay his metaphysical cards on the table” is to look for locutions such as “in Metaphysico rigore” and “dans la precision metaphysique” (1990:5). I agree that this is an important linguistic clue for isolating the esoteric content of Leibniz’s philosophy. However, in a number of cases passages that are prefaced by one of these linguistic clues do not fully articulate the details of the view that he is endorsing. For example, in the Système nouveau Leibniz writes: “It is quite true that, speaking with metaphysical rigor [en parlant selon la rigueur métaphysique], there is no real influence of one created substance on another, and that all things, with all their reality, are continually produced by the power [vertu] of God” (G 4:484; AG:143). While Leibniz is clearly committed to the claim that all the reality in things is continually produced by God, there are several significantly different ways of fleshing out this thesis. Leibniz does not specify exactly how the claim should be interpreted in the Système nouveau. Recall also Leibniz’s remarks in text [3]: “it would not be impossible, speaking with metaphysical rigor [en parlant dans la rigueur metaphysique], that, at bottom, there should only be these intelligible substances, and that sensible things should only be appearances.” Here Leibniz states that the position in question is “not impossible” without explicitly

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After carefully looking at all of these considerations one can formulate interpretive hypotheses about what the esoteric content of Leibniz’s philosophy is, about which texts express that content most clearly, and which texts utilize one or more esoteric strategies.

In a number of cases there will not be enough information to determine with certainty whether an esoteric strategy is being used. When Leibniz uses seemingly familiar language, without providing definitions for the concepts involved, is he utilizing an esoteric strategy in order to make his views seem closer to received opinions, or is he simply unsure of what the proper definitions are? When he presents one of his positions as a hypothesis, is this because he is unsure of how to demonstrate the thesis, or is he omitting the demonstration as part of an esoteric strategy? When Leibniz says seemingly different things about a particular issue in different texts, is this due to a change in position or merely to a change in the mode of exposition? In such cases one must look at all of the relevant evidence and attempt to determine which interpretive hypothesis is most plausible, all things considered.

This difficulty can be illustrated by the following example. In a 1714 letter to Remond, Leibniz remarks that he set forth his opinion on the controversial topic of the action of God on creatures in the *Essais de théodicée*, but that he would not be upset to see the objections to Malebranche’s view that have been recently published in a treatise on this topic, along with Malebranche’s reply. He concludes by saying that “these matters are lacking in clarity in the absence of good definitions” (G 3:621). One might take these remarks to suggest that Leibniz himself is not in possession of such definitions. However, it is noteworthy that Leibniz is ambiguous here about whether he lacks such definitions or merely has not presented them to the public yet. In his previous letter to Remond he says that he “touched on this matter [of the action of God on creatures] in my *Essais de théodicée* as much as it seemed to me to be necessary” (G 3:613). This suggests that he did not think that he needed to provide a complete treatment of the issue in the *Essais de théodicée*, which does not imply that he did not have a fully worked out view on the topic. I will not attempt to resolve this question one way or the other at present; I merely want to acknowledge some of the difficulties involved in determining whether or not Leibniz is utilizing the exoteric strategy of familiar language in particular passages. I thank Donald Rutherford for pressing me on this point.

As Garber has aptly remarked, “putting it all together is, in a way, more an art than a science” (2009, xviii). I hope to have shown, however, that in attempting to “put it all together” it is essential to consider the ways that the distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric informs Leibniz’s writings. Being attuned to Leibniz’s views on exoteric writing can help us recognize a broader range of interpretive possibilities and allow us to make more informed decisions about which interpretive hypotheses are most plausible, all things considered.

I will close this essay with one final, somewhat speculative, thought. Leibniz’s ultimate aim was to use exoteric texts to prepare his readers for a treatise that would unfold his entire system by means of the esoteric mode of presentation. This would have been the most accurate way for Leibniz to present the esoteric content of his metaphysics, for it would utilize rigorous definitions that would (at least largely) be free of the ambiguities that plague ordinary sensory-based language. Given that it would also contain rigorous demonstrations, it would, at least in principle, enable his readers to be convinced of the truth of his metaphysical theses. Leibniz insisted that he was capable of composing a close approximation of such a work in his later years, but he never accomplished the task. Why did Leibniz not devote more of his time to this important project in his later years? There are surely a number of factors that contributed to this state of affairs, but let me offer a hypothesis about one of the most significant ones. I think it is important not to lose sight of the fact that many of his most detailed metaphysically themed correspondences ended more or less in failure. De Volder, Antoine Arnauld, and Christian Wolff, for example, either did not fully understand the intelligible content of Leibniz’s metaphysics or were unwilling to accept it as truth. Leibniz’s efforts to carefully and strategically reveal the content of his metaphysics to these interlocutors by means of individually tailored intellectual stepping-stones did not prove successful. Perhaps Leibniz did not think that his exoteric texts — published works and private correspondences alike — had yet been successful enough to risk publishing his metaphysics via the
esoteric mode. The world was not ready for Leibniz’s esoteric philosophy. 66 67

ABBREVIATIONS OF EDITIONS OF LEIBNIZ’S TEXTS

A: Samtliche Schriften und Briefe (Darmstadt and Berlin: Berlin Academy, 1923–) (cited by series, volume, and page).


66. Rutherford has suggested that Leibniz’s ethical and religious commitments led him to largely abandon (at least in practice) the esoteric mode of presentation in his later years. While the esoteric mode would allow for the most rigorous presentation of his views, it would also highlight his nuanced metaphysical disagreements with other figures. Leibniz realized that many of these metaphysical disagreements were “without consequences for the larger ethical and religious project within which his theoretical philosophy is embedded” (1996:201). He thus chose to gloss over many of these disagreements, pursuing instead a course of reconciliation that prioritized concord and agreement over metaphysical rigor. On my reading of the esoteric/exoteric distinction, one should not view Leibniz’s production of esoteric texts as indicating a move away from the esoteric mode of presentation. Exoteric texts, which emphasize agreement and minimize or conceal disagreement, were designed to serve as intellectual stepping stones that would prepare his readers to be able to appreciate the rigorous content of his metaphysics as presented via the esoteric mode.

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Leibniz and the Art of Exoteric Writing

FC: Lettres et opuscules inédits, ed. F. de Careil (New York: Georg Olms, 1975)


NE: New Essays on Human Understanding, trans. P. Remnant and J. Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) (the pagination of this work corresponds to that of the Academy edition (A VI.vi); thus only one reference is required).


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SECONDARY LITERATURE


