

***Leibniz and the Two Sophies: The Philosophical Correspondence.* Edited and translated by Lloyd Strickland (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2011) pp. 468.**

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*L*eibniz and the Two Sophies is primarily a selection from the correspondence between Leibniz and Sophie, Electress of Hanover (1630-1714) and the correspondence between Leibniz and Sophie's daughter, Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia (1668-1705). The volume follows on the back of Lloyd Strickland's *The Shorter Leibniz Texts* (Continuum, 2006) and the webpage www.leibniz-translations.com.

The task of translation brings some satisfaction and reward, but is always an arduous one, and the community of scholars owes a huge debt to Lloyd Strickland for his continuing efforts to make Leibniz's texts available in English. The gratitude should be particularly great in the case of the current volume, where the ninety-three separate selections for the volume had to be distilled from some 750 items of correspondence and related writings. Sixty-four of these are letters and excerpts of letters that passed between Leibniz and Sophie or Leibniz and Sophie Charlotte (three of which were also addressed to Sophie's niece Elizabeth Charlotte, Duchess of Orléans). Another nine excerpts appear as an appendix on the grounds that they are isolated comments which did not generate any response from their recipient. The remaining items are a mixture of letters from the three correspondents to third parties which directly pertain to the content of the main correspondences (eleven in total), a draft of one of Leibniz's letters to Sophie, and a number of free standing pieces which were either sent with letters from the correspondences or written as a result of discussions of issues therein. The earliest of the items – a letter from Sophie to Leibniz – dates from October 1691 and the latest – a letter from Leibniz to Sophie – is probably from 1714.

Among the free-standing pieces we find (the titles are the editor's) *A Resumé of Philosophy* by Francis Mercury van Helmont and Leibniz's response *Thoughts on van Helmont's Doctrines* (both from 1696), and *The Soul and its Nature*, by G. W. Molanus and Leibniz's response *The Soul and its Operations* (both from 1700). There is also a short piece by Leibniz, *The Principle of Uniformity*, written for Sophie Charlotte, probably in the summer of 1704, and a preface to Rosenroth's German translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* that appeared under van Helmont's name in 1696, but which Strickland argues was probably written by Leibniz. The volume also contains a new translation of the response to John

Toland's philosophy *Reflections on the Doctrine of a Single Universal Spirit* (from 1702) and *On what is Beyond the External Senses and Matter* (1702), a piece which is better known in the revised version that Leibniz sent to Sophie Charlotte as the *Letter on what is Independent of Sense and Matter* (also reproduced here with an additional draft). Finally, there is also a letter from Toland to Sophie Charlotte in which he offers his reply to this piece.

The text is presented in English only, but it is a translation of Strickland's own transcriptions which are based on the surviving manuscripts. It improves significantly upon the Onno Klopp's edition of the correspondences in volumes 7-10 of *Die Werke von Leibniz*, which is the only complete edition available (the Akademie edition of the correspondences being far from complete at this point). It corrects Klopp at various points and includes a generous selection of annotations, deletions and marginalia. Accompanying the primary text there is a substantive introduction, which is divided into four sections. The first considers the philosophical significance ascribed by other writers to Sophie and Sophie Charlotte; the second concerns the relations between Leibniz and the two correspondents and circumstances surrounding the correspondences; the third is a brief overview of the correspondences themselves; and the fourth is a more detailed discussion of Leibniz's and Sophie's contributions respectively. The volume also contains a well-constructed index, which comprises a subject index and an index of persons.

The translation is very readable throughout and of the high standard those familiar with Strickland's previous work would expect. Those engaged in serious scholarship will, of course, want to return to the original language. However, the volume is a reliable guide. And for those who do wish to look at the original language, footnotes at the bottom of the page alert readers to deviations from previous editions of the texts. Strickland also provides detailed information about sources and a short introduction before each item. The latter are very helpful for positioning the selections within the more voluminous correspondences from which they are drawn and the broader intellectual context within which they were written.

Leibniz's letters range over many of the issues that were of philosophical interest to him from the early 1690s to the end of his life. However, as Strickland points out in his introduction, there are two clear foci. The first is substance and the second is theodicy and what Strickland refers to throughout as Leibniz's "philosophy of contentment." When it comes to substance, Leibniz's emphasis is on his conception of substances as unities. He repeatedly presents versions of his argument from the existence of composites to the existence of simples, and his reasons for

thinking that the unities are not material. Leibniz is also keen to discuss his attendant beliefs that at least some of unities in question may be identified with human souls, and that their unity provides the basis for a natural indestructibility and immortality. These latter claims link with the second focus. For they are often brought forward in service of Leibniz's theodicy, where he argues that the indefinite duration of substances provides God with the opportunity to ensure that all good and bad deeds go appropriately rewarded and punished.

My initial reading of the volume leaves me with the impression that there is not a great deal that will strike serious students of Leibniz's philosophy as truly novel – especially given that some of the more important writings that are included in the volume are already translated and well-known. However, as scholars consider the letters in detail, they are sure to find new evidence to support their favoured interpretations, and it will surely be the case that new avenues that I have not imagined will be opened up. Furthermore, as Strickland rightly points out, the correspondence has one very important dimension, which may well be unique. For nowhere else in Leibniz's corpus do we find Leibniz as concerned to press the practical importance of his conclusions about the nature of reality and the proper conception of our relation to God. The contentment that should arise from believing in the justice of a God who has created us as members of the best of all possible worlds is clearly offered as a way of life rather than as an abstract theory. There may well be PhD thesis or book in the waiting for someone who works closely with these texts and others to explore Leibniz's philosophy as way of life.

One of the few recent commentators to have written about these correspondences has interpreted Leibniz's focus on practical issues as a response to Sophie's and Sophie Charlotte's amateurish interest in philosophy – resulting in a rather light-weight versions of his doctrines.¹ Nevertheless, I think Strickland is right to imply that whilst Leibniz is focussed on the ramifications of his views for the attitude that his correspondents should bring to their lives, this should not be read as an indication that Sophie and Sophie Charlotte were deemed worthy only of the popular aspects of his philosophy. As Strickland points out, the philosophical portions are written with a sophistication similar to what we find in other writings concerned with the same issues (some private to Leibniz himself). Thus, it is not obviously the case that Leibniz treated his correspondents as anything other than serious interlocutors who simply happened to be most interested in the more practical aspects of his philosophy – much as the form and content of the De Volder correspondence was driven by De Volder's desire to find out Leibniz's views about

the causes of the motion in bodies, or the Arnauld correspondence was driven by the consideration of theses that Arnauld found objectionable in the summary of the *Discourse on Metaphysics* he had received.

That said, there is some countervailing evidence that would need to be taken into account were one to try to make a fuller assessment of the ways in which Leibniz's attitudes toward his correspondents affected the correspondence itself. Leibniz's response to Molanus' paper on the nature of the soul, which features as item 37 in the volume, was sent to Sophie Charlotte's lady-in-waiting Henrietta von Pöllnitz. The later parts of this paper involve a relatively straightforward mathematical analogy and Leibniz asked von Pöllnitz to show Sophie Charlotte only the first part, observing: "I do not think the second part of what I said . . . too suitable to be presented before our incomparable Princess. For although the mind of Her Electoral Serenity is marvellously perceptive, and although nothing escapes her when she puts her mind to it, nevertheless it seems that it is inappropriate to offer her complicated ideas which involve numbers and shapes unless she expressly commands it" (p.197). It is true that in a later letter, Sophie Charlotte wrote the following: "Another pressing reason for you to come is a work of charity, for Pöllnitz has bought a book about mathematics which she wants to study, and the terms and the meaning are so difficult for her that she will lose her mind if you do not come to help her. For my part, I am happy to look at the diagrams and numbers without reading, since all that is Greek to me" (p.215). But it is hard not to suspect Leibniz of a somewhat patronizing attitude. And this is evidenced by a more damning comment from a letter that Sophie Charlotte wrote to von Pöllnitz in August 1701: "Here is a letter of Leibniz's which I am sending you. I like the man, but I am inclined to get angry at his treating everything so superficially with me. He mistrusts my intelligence, and he rarely gives me a detailed answer to the questions I raise."²

These considerations lead naturally to other important issues that are raised by the publication of *Leibniz and the Two Sophies*. Whilst the volume is a significant and much welcomed addition to the English-language editions of Leibniz's works it also has another purpose. It appears in the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*. Thus, in the eyes of the publishers, it is surely intended to make a contribution to on-going debates about the intellectual lives and representations of women in the early modern period. *Leibniz and the Two Sophies* does not seem to fit very neatly into the series, which is largely comprised of editions of texts written by women from the period as well as a few texts by men that give a window onto prevalent conceptions of women at the time. Despite purporting to open a

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window onto the philosophical worldviews of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte – the back cover reads: “Too long themselves unfairly dismissed as philosophical lightweights, proper justice may now be given to [Sophie’s and Sophie Charlotte’s] views through this edition of their private correspondence with Leibniz,” – much of the volume is taken up by Leibniz’s letters and only provides us with materials for investigating his views.

That said, the introduction to the volume focusses on Sophie and Sophie Charlotte in some detail. Strickland begins his introduction by observing that, where they have been discussed, Sophie and Sophie Charlotte have been portrayed as little more than passive, if enthusiastic, students of philosophy, whose importance lies in their having supported Leibniz financially and having stimulated his philosophical thinking both in personal discussion at court and through their correspondences with him. Strickland traces this back to early characterizations by their contemporary and acquaintance John Toland and, in Sophie Charlotte’s case, her grandson Frederick II. By contrast Strickland tells us that “it does both a disservice to suppose that their place in the history of philosophy can be secured only through the services they rendered to Leibniz. Likewise it does both a disservice to depict (intentionally or otherwise) their interest in philosophy as a passive one, since there is clear evidence that both actively engaged in philosophical discussion proper, and had contributions to make to the philosophical debates of their day. This evidence is to be found in their respective writings for Leibniz” (p.3). Strickland attributes this appearance-reality gap in large part to the fact that the correspondences with Leibniz did not appear in print until the nineteenth century and that, even when they did appear, those who chose to write about them “elected not to mention, let alone discuss, the philosophical contributions of the two women” (p.4). Strickland suggests that this may well have been due to the lack of interest which scholars have had in listening to the voices of women philosophers of the early modern period until relatively recently. But he also puts it down to factors which have been mentioned already as follows: “[T]he philosophical writings of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte are but a very small part of their respective correspondences with Leibniz, which are mostly filled with political news and court gossip. To find the philosophical material requires combing through volumes and volumes of writings, most of which are of no interest to philosophers” (p.4).

Given the comments that Strickland makes in the first few pages of the volume, the reader might expect the material from Leibniz to be accompanied by a significant number of philosophical contributions from Sophie and Sophie Charlotte.

It may be perhaps surprising to discover then just how little of the selected text is written by them. If we turn first to Sophie. Twenty of the items in the volume are excerpts from her letters. However, two of these (items 18 and 20) are actually excerpts which consist exclusively of remarks by another person which she is conveying to Leibniz. Each of the items is short. So short, in fact, that the total number of lines of text is around 250 or approximately 7 full pages. Sophie Charlotte's contributions are even fewer. Her 6 items add up to just over 2 full pages. But the situation gets worse when we look for text which contains expressions of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte's own philosophical views. Turning to Sophie: the first four of her items, from 1691, are concerned with her report of the visions of Rosamunde von der Asseburg, where the only philosophical claims are: 1) expression of agreement with Leibniz's suggestion that the visions should be distinguished from those of genuine prophets which involve miraculous grace; and 2) a remark that appears to commit Sophie to the view that all causes are natural ones (p.85). The next excerpt from 1694 concerns two books which Sophie had been sent by van Helmont; in it we learn only that she thinks "it is difficult to understand how, after the separation from the body, we would be able to think, as we no longer have any organs" (p.114). The excerpt that follows from 1697 is simply a report on the receipt of one hundred copies of Rosenroth's translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which Leibniz had helped van Helmont to have reprinted.

Three letters from 1700-01 do contain some more developed philosophical thoughts (interspersed with an excerpt that has none) in the form of comments on Leibniz's views about substance and unity and some remarks which express a commitment to some form of materialism regarding the mental (of which more below). These are followed in 1702 by a letter which, somewhat surprisingly given the foregoing, contains the following remarks on John Toland's materialism: "he ought to say why matter has movement and order, and how there is sensation in the world, which would be strange and about which he apparently knows nothing" (p.292). Next there is a pair of very brief excerpts from letters of 1702 in which Sophie first expresses confusion regarding the views of Jakob Heinrich von Fleming as reported to her by Leibniz and then relief that Leibniz seems equally baffled. This is followed by another pair of excerpts, this time from 1713, in which she is dismissive of the text *A Discourse on Free-thinking* by Anthony Collins and again relieved when Leibniz replies to express his agreement. Finally, Appendix A contains two more items. In the first, from 1691, Sophie explicitly endorses the view that God could have created a better world than the actual one and the final

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piece, from 1705, is a report of the supposed practice of human sacrifice in Formosa (Taiwan).

As noted above, Sophie Charlotte has only 6 items. The first two are brief excerpts from letters that she wrote in 1699. In these she expresses agreement with Leibniz's universal determinism as expressed to Sophie (in item 31), tells him "it has so convinced me that you may henceforth consider me as one of your disciples" (p.184), and thanks him for his having convinced her that we should be happy with our state (p.188). In the next excerpt, from 1702, we find Sophie Charlotte mainly concerned to tell Leibniz how her temperament leads her to think (apparently contradicting Leibniz's views) that she has "a lot less to fear for the future than for the present" since after death she will no longer have a body "prone to sufferings" (p. 214). There are then two selections from 1703. In the first she expresses agreement with Leibniz's view that there are eternal truths of goodness and justice and in the second observes that she has been reading Locke and is keen to know how Leibniz will refute the attack on innateness, which she has found compelling. The last selection, from 1698, is simply a report that van Helmont is in Hanover and an expression of the wish that Leibniz were around to help make sense of what he is saying.

It is reasonable to wonder then to what extent the text of the volumes bears out Strickland's resistance to the traditional understanding of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte as no more than passive consumers of philosophy whose major philosophical contribution was to enable Leibniz's work.

It is unclear how much is at stake here for Strickland in the case of Sophie Charlotte as he says very little about her contribution. Indeed, one might wonder just how much of a disservice she has really been done by the tradition given Strickland's account. Among the sources that he quotes, both John Toland and Frederick II seem to me to present Sophie Charlotte in an even more positive light than the text of this volume evidences. Thus Toland says of Sophie Charlotte: "Her Reading is infinit, and she is conversant in all manner of Subjects; nor is She more admir'd for her inimitable Wit, than for her exact Knowledg of the most abstruse parts of Philosophy," and Frederick II reports that Leibniz himself said of her "Madam, there is no way to satisfy you: you want to know the reason for the reason" (p.3). These quotations don't represent Sophie Charlotte as without her own philosophical views. In fact, they suggest that she had a lot more to say in conversation than the few remarks that Strickland has managed to unearth in written form. We are simply left with the unfortunate conclusion that there is simply no written record

of the philosophical views of someone who may well have had interesting things to say.

It is to Sophie's legacy as a philosopher that Strickland devotes most of his attention. Indeed, the section of the introduction that deals with Sophie's philosophical contributions runs to fifteen pages. Here Strickland brings the selections in the volume into conflict with some more precise claims that have been made in the literature. The first, which he locates in the writings of F. E. Baily, is an insinuation that "Sophie's attitude toward philosophy was less than serious" (p.49). But he also mentions the more damning intimations (though Strickland seems to accept that they may be unwitting) of Adolphus Ward, Jacqueline Broad, Beatrice Zedler, and Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil, the last of whom he presents as "citing some of her remarks that suggest that [Sophie] had difficulty grasping basic philosophical ideas" (ibid.). In the case of Zedler, Strickland demonstrates that a claim that Sophie is admitting ignorance about fairly basic issues is based on partial quotation and lack of attention to context. The brief quotation is intended to show that Sophie admits to not grasping the meaning of the terms "thought" and "immaterial". In fact, when the rest of the passage is examined we can see that Sophie is expressing reasonable confusion about Leibniz's overly condensed presentation of the abstruse views of the long-forgotten nobleman Jakob Heinrich von Fleming. In the case of Foucher de Careil, it is Sophie's claim that she does not grasp the force of Leibniz's argument from the divisibility of matter to the existence of immaterial unities, or indeed the doctrine of substantial unity itself, that is presented as evidence of her lack of philosophical intelligence. But, as Strickland notes, Sophie's confusion is only natural given that Leibniz does not provide an explanation of how it is that pluralities of immaterial and unextended substances give rise to extended matter. Overall, I think a compelling case is made for Strickland's conclusion that "It seems to me that Sophie's only failing in this matter is her honesty" (p.53) and that we do not have "sufficient grounds to draw any negative conclusions about Sophie's philosophical abilities."

But Strickland is not content to expose the unreasonableness of the way in which Sophie has been characterized as a philosopher. He wishes to argue that the correspondence provides us with grounds for regarding Sophie as "a very independent thinker" (p.53) who advocates materialism based on arguments that "can be seen as respectable and original contributions to the early modern debate about the ontological status of the mind" (p.64). Sophie's independence is evident in two, not entirely distinct, ways. First, Strickland argues that some of the views that she

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articulates reveal her to have been at odds with Leibniz rather than a passive consumer of his words of wisdom. Thus, as mentioned above, her reports about human sacrifice in Formosa are accompanied by an endorsement of universal salvation, a doctrine which was rejected by Leibniz (p.428). And in the letter of May 1691 Sophie appears to reject the claim central to Leibniz's theodicy that God could not have produced a better world in which there were only meritorious people (p.418). But, whilst these passages are suggestive, they are isolated and very brief, providing us with meagre evidence. Indeed, the passage that contains the indication that Sophie rejects Leibniz's optimism occurs toward the very beginning of their correspondence, and we have no textual evidence one way or the other regarding the views that she ultimately adopted after her years of friendship with Leibniz. More interesting is her advocacy of materialism. This flies in the face of one of the most basic tenets of Leibniz's philosophy, and it is a view which is repeatedly at issue in the letters that he wrote to Sophie. Furthermore, as Strickland points out, in taking such a stance, Sophie did not ally herself with conventional thinking in opposition to Leibnizian revision; she was on the side of the radicals. Thus the thesis of independence of philosophical mind is well-supported here.

Most interesting to Strickland, however, is his suggestion that Sophie was not merely in disagreement with Leibniz over materialism, but that this was reasonable disagreement based on original arguments. Strickland suggests that three distinct arguments are present in the correspondence. Two appear in a very condensed form in a report of a conversation with Molanus from a letter of June 1700.³ In the first of these, it is claimed that "thoughts ... are material inasmuch as they are composed of things that enter into us through the senses" (p.190). In the second the basis for the materialist conclusion is that "one cannot think of anything without making for oneself an idea of things which one has seen, heard, or tasted" (ibid.). The third argument is found in a slightly later letter from November 1701. Here Sophie argues as follows:

I am not entirely persuaded that thoughts do not occupy place, since I find my imagination so full that I remember the past and yet have no more room for the present, in which I even forget what people look like. It therefore has to be that something material wears out or fills up, which produces the memories and which forms the ideas. (p.210)

Each of these arguments is stated only once in the correspondence and very briefly. Strickland goes to some length to construct more elaborate interpretations by providing plausible background assumptions and additional premises. He also considers re-

sponses that Sophie received from Molanus (in the case of the second argument) and Leibniz (in the case of the third) and offers responses on Sophie's behalf. Strickland's overall conclusion is that the arguments "hold up well" (p.64) and, as I noted, he regards them as "respectable" and "original" examples of philosophy for their time.

One could pursue further the issue of just how "philosophically respectable" and "original" Sophie's ideas were. Instead, however, I want to close with some concerns that I came to have about the volume when reading the sections of the introduction which focus on Sophie (and to a much lesser extent Sophie Charlotte). It remains unclear to me just what Strickland's intentions are in these passages. It doesn't seem to me that we are presented – even after a great deal of "rational reconstruction" – with arguments or philosophical theses that have much bearing on contemporary debates, or which would be of much interest to those working in those areas today. Nor does it seem that we are being offered candidates for inclusion in a modified canon in the way that other early modern figures such as Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, and Catharine Trotter quite rightly have been offered. There simply isn't enough material in the volume for it to be the case, as is suggested on the back cover of the volume, that "proper justice can now be given to [Sophie and Sophie Charlotte's] views through this edition" in either of these respects. On the contrary, I think we remain almost entirely in the dark, with a few fragments and a sense that there may have been far richer dialogue that occurred with Leibniz in person but was never committed to paper. It is going to be extremely useful for those wishing to study Leibniz's philosophical thought using the conventional methods of current Anglo-American scholarship to have the selections from Leibniz in this volume available in translation. But in tension with the apparent aims of the series in which the volume appears, we might worry that this is more at the expense of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte than in their service. For, with "philosophical interest" as the main criterion for selecting from among the voluminous correspondence, the voices of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte have become almost completely lost. Rather than discovering rich autobiographical documentation of the lives – intellectual and otherwise – of these fascinating historical figures, for the most part we find ourselves encountering extended descriptions of Leibniz's philosophy that he decided to inflict upon them (just how desired this was remains somewhat unclear). One obvious counter to this is that Strickland's target audience can be confident that he has left out material which would be of interest only to historians and that looking at the broader context would not add anything of philosophical interest.

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Natural as this response is, I think we should be wary of it. For Leibniz's correspondences with Sophie and Sophie Charlotte provide us with important opportunities to engage in reflection about what deserves to be regarded as philosophically interesting. They provide sites at which an established member of the canon expressed himself in the context of sustained dialogues which drifted in and out of what we would ordinarily think of as philosophical territory. And it is possible that we might, with a sufficiently patient and sensitive approach to the voices of all the participants, find ourselves encountering material here that opens up new avenues for exploring not only the motivations for Leibniz's philosophical views, but also the ways in which the social and political concerns of all the correspondents intersected with the form and content of its expression. Furthermore, with our sights focussed on Sophie and Sophie Charlotte and a more liberal conception of the philosophically interesting it is hard to know what we might find ourselves thinking or how much our methodological horizons might be expanded. The correspondence between Leibniz and two female patrons who were willing to indulge his philosophical musing ought to be fertile ground for this. Unfortunately, not only does the volume do little to encourage the reader to think more creatively about what it is to engage with such interesting ground, it doesn't really allow us to encounter that ground at all.

Before the publication of this translation those wishing to think about the correspondences had little option other than to read the rest of the material that constitutes them, and the voices of Sophie and Sophie Charlotte had to be heard in at least a muffled way. Now historians of philosophy have an excuse to take the easy way out. The current volume initially seemed very welcome to me as a historian of Leibniz's philosophy trained in the "analytic tradition". However, on reading and reflecting further on the correspondences, I am left thinking that I ought to approach them with a more open mind, feeling a little frustrated that this will still require that I go back to the source material, and guiltily suspecting that I am now even less likely to do that. These may, of course, be expressions of personal vices, but I also fear that they may not be.

Strickland's work is a fine example of what many of us have been trained to think of as a paradigmatic way to make historical texts by philosophers available to scholars with interests in those figures conceived as philosophers. Nevertheless, I can't help but wonder whether we all need to think harder about the ways in which these approaches may end up limiting Leibniz studies and the studies of those with whom he corresponded.⁴

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Notes

¹ See George Macdonald Ross, “Leibniz und Sophie Charlotte,” in *Sophie Charlotte und ihr Schloß*, ed. S Herz, C. M. Vogtherr, and F Windt (London: Prestel, 1999), 103.

² G. E. Gruhauer, *G. W. v. Leibniz, eine Biographie* (Breslau: 1846) vol. II, 248. Translation by George MacDonald Ross.

³ It is interesting to note that Sophie in fact attributes these arguments to a conversation which involved her son Georg Ludwig and Molanus. However, as Strickland points out Molanus’s testimony contradicts this and Georg Ludwig does not have a reputation for having been philosophically inclined. So the attribution to Sophie seems very plausible.

⁴ With thanks to David Leopold and Amia Srinivasan for comments on an earlier draft.