

Mattia Geretto, *L'Angelologia Leibniziana*. Soveria Mannelli (Calabria): Rubbettino Editore, 2010. Pp. 392.

Reviewed by Patrick Riley, Harvard University

Though angels (and “*genii*”) make hundreds of appearances in Leibniz’ published and unpublished writings, there has been (until now) no book systematically treating these “higher” monads (located between men and God in the *Civitas Dei*); Mattia Geretto has now remedied this lack with a definitive study of every passage (it seems) in which Leibniz discusses *gli angeli* and *spiriti superiori*. Given that 2010 marks the 300th anniversary of the *Théodicée*, which Geretto calls “*la trattazione [di Leibniz] più approfondita e organica che sia possibile rinvenire tra tutti i suoi scritti*” with respect to angels and *genii* (p. 19), he begins with many pages on *theos-dike* and on the *Causa Dei*. But by the end of his study Geretto has also treated “angelically” the *Nouveaux Essais*, the “Discourse on Metaphysics,” the “New System,” the *Nova Methodus*, the “Monadology,” and the “Principles of Nature and of Grace,” *inter alia*, as well as all of Leibniz’ relevant letters to Arnauld, Malebranche, Bossuet, Bayle, Morell, Electress Sophie, Queen Sophie-Charlotte, Des Bosses, Coste, Burnett—in a word, *tutto*. And Geretto even publishes many hitherto unknown Leibniz MSS from the Hannover-archive, warmly thanking those *generosissimi* Leibniz-scholars Hartmut Rudolph, Stephan Waldhoff and Sabine Sellschopp, who helped him decipher the *Handschriften* (and who have also kindly helped the present reviewer for many years). (Since Geretto was the recipient of a DAAD bursary at Berlin/Potsdam, and of other grants in Hannover and Wolfenbüttel, and has worked with Breger, Li, Poser, Rudolph, Beeley, and Schepers, *inter alia*, he *knows* these manuscripts.)

It comes as no surprise that the most convincingly “Leibnizian” angel-passages cited and treated by Geretto are those in which Leibniz is discussing *all* the “members” of the City of God, from human beings to God himself—with angels or *genii* intervening, *pour ainsi dire*, so that the *plenum* will be a *continuum* with no “*vacuum formarum*” (Leibniz 1705, Geretto p. 103). Thus in *Principes de la nature et de la grâce* (1714), Leibniz urges (in a passage well-interpreted by Geretto) that “all minds [*esprits*], be they men, be they angels [*génies*], entering in virtue of reason and of the eternal verities into a kind of society with God, are members of the City of God, that is to say of the most perfect state, formed and governed by the greatest and best of monarchs.” Here Leibniz’ demi-Platonic point, grounded

in the *Phaedo* and in the *Euthyphro*, is that every *gradation* of “mind” sees the same eternal mathematical and moral verities, and that “*in virtue*” of that rational “seeing” all *esprits* belong together in “a kind of society”: but angels/*genii*, though nearer to God in their degree of perfection, have the same “view” as men of every kind of “necessity,” whether metaphysical or moral. (Geretto also treated this same passage in his fine paper at the 2001 Leibniz-Kongress in Berlin).

The same point about angels as “*intermediate*” rational substances is made most effectively in a passage from the great *Meditation on the Common Notion of Justice* (1703/1704), which Geretto treats illuminatingly in chapter 2 of his *Angelologia Leibniziana* (p. 109 n. 129). Leibniz had urged in the *Meditation* that those who “make justice arbitrary and dependent on the good pleasure of a judge” (even God or the gods) are just like those who maintain that “our science, for example that of numbers . . . does not agree with that of God or of the angels, or perhaps that all truth is arbitrary and depends on whim.” Such “whimsical” views, for Leibniz—whether expressed by Euthyphro, Thrasymachus, Callicles, Epicurus, Descartes, or Hobbes—show that some (not very mindful) minds do not know “the difference between necessary and eternal truths which must be the same everywhere, and that which is contingent and changeable or arbitrary.” But the necessary and eternal are “such for God and for the angels”—and of course for philosophers who glimpse eternity. In these passages, angels are (additional) “knowers” of eternal verity and necessity, sooner than semi-autonomous “historical” actors in Scripture—like Gabriel or Michael or Lucifer.

Perhaps the most original and innovative part of Geretto’s fine book is his ingenious hypothetical reconstruction of a (possibly) missing late “angelic” work by Leibniz—the so-called *De Sermone Angelorum*. Soon after Leibniz’ 1716 death his last secretary, J.G. Eckhart, published a memoir, *Lebensbeschreibung des Freyherrn von Leibnitz*, in which the claim was made that the great Hannoverian’s “last uncompleted work was *De Sermone Angelorum*” (Geretto p. 11). Geretto grants that “it has not been possible to recover” such a work, nor indeed “any work at all explicitly bearing the title *De Angelis*” (Ibid.); and he reasonably suggests that Eckhart may have mistaken (part of) Leibniz’ very late *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716)—recently re-published in a superb critical edition by Wenchao Li and Hans Poser—for an *angelologia leibniziana*. (Alternatively, Eckhart may have been thinking of either a Leibnizian mathematical work or one dealing with the “*Characteristica Universalis*.”) Geretto then goes on, in Ch. 5 of his book (“*De Sermone Angelorum* ‘Restitutus’”), to indicate how the celebrated 1714

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“Monadology” might be reinterpreted in a “*lettura ‘angelologica’ della cosiddetta ‘Monadologia’*” (pp. 279-286)—by showing that (much) “higher” monads or hyper-rational “substances” (more “superhumanly” perfect than men but not yet (of course) an *ens perfectissimum* existing *ex necessitate*) might count as *genii* or “angels” in the City of God. And Geretto strengthens his *lettura angelologica* by prefacing his “reading” of the “Monadology” (pp. 269ff) with helpful fragments of Scripture and of Leibniz’ own relevant writings, such as the 1714 Vienna lecture “On the Greeks as founders of rational theology” (first published from the Hannover MS by the present reviewer in 1976). This Geretto-chapter is as freshly innovative as it is exhaustively learned—a fine achievement. (It should be noted in passing, by the way, that Geretto’s publisher, Rubbettino Editore, is becoming a Leibniz-force to reckon with: for in 2005 the same house gave us Luca Basso’s magisterial *Individuo e comunità nella filosofia politica di G.W. Leibniz*—the finest Italian study of Leibniz’ political thought since the heyday of Vittorio Mathieu a half-century ago.)

At the very beginning of *L’Angelologia Leibniziana*, Geretto quotes some famous lines from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which the (anti)hero reminds us that “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”—including, one assumes, *angels*. (A Leibniz/Shakespeare juxtaposition is most apt, as Geretto rightly sees, given that both writers are anti-legalistic defenders of “higher” justice as mercy, generosity and charity: hence Portia’s chiding of Shylock—“though justice be thy plea . . . we do plead for mercy”—in a virtual anticipation of Leibniz’ *iustitia caritas sapientis*.) Geretto might with equal aptness recall the (literally) angelic last words of Horatio to (now-dead) Hamlet as the curtain descends: “Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.” And we can add, again aptly echoing Geretto and Shakespeare: “’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.”

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