

**Report on the 2004 Montréal *Nouveaux Essais* Conference**  
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The Colloque International G.W. Leibniz *Nouveaux Essais sur l'entendement humain*, in commemoration of the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the composition of Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais*, took place in Montréal, Quebec, Sept. 29-Oct 1, under the sponsorship of the Université de Montréal, Concordia University, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and the Leibniz Gesellschaft. It was organized by François Duchesneau, and his group of graduate students and staff, with the assistance of Justin E.H. Smith and Catherine Wilson.

Rather than attempting to mount a conference devoted to Leibniz's philosophy in general, the organizers tried to bring together a small but international group of scholars who have in recent years concerned themselves specially with philosophical issues arising in the *Nouveaux Essais*. Participants arrived from Argentina, England, France, Germany, Hungary, and Israel, as well as Canada and the United States.

The papers, presented in French and English, often with bi-lingual discussion, fell into two main categories. First, there were new treatments of the recognized problems raised in Locke's text and treated by Leibniz. These included the problems of personal identity (De Gaudemar, Blank); moral motivation (Davidson, Phemister); innateness (Kulstad, Poser); the reality of species (Jones, Vargas); the theory of substance (Garber, Hartz).

Second, there were papers on topics and themes that are relatively new in the Leibniz literature. The context and occasion of the *Nouveaux Essais*, which is neither a pure commentary nor a true dialogue, the correspondence leading up to their composition, and Leibniz's rhetorical stance vis-a-vis Locke were discussed. (Dascal). Several papers focused on Leibniz's theory of mathematical truth and mathematical knowledge, with a side glance at Leibniz's Platonism (Breger, Beeley). The significance for Kant of the dispute over the concepts of reflection (Fichant) was a newly-explored outcome of the controversy. Another set of themes concerned the sciences of life and generation, inferences to hidden processes, empiricism and the method of hypotheses (Duchesneau, Smith). Leibniz and Locke's responses to the emerging threat of moral relativism was the subject of another paper (Boros), and several papers attended to the political and theological doctrines at issue between Leibniz and Locke and suggested the appropriateness of a "lecture politique" of the *Nouveaux Essais* (Griard, Riley, Wilson).

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A round table on the last day provoked heated discussion as to the overall philosophical merits of the *Nouveaux Essais*. It soon became apparent that there was greater agreement between conference participants on points of interpretation regarding the text, than on the coherence and value of the work as a whole. Since—it was generally agreed—Leibniz excelled as a metaphysician and not as an epistemologist, the suggestion that the *Nouveaux Essais* constitutes one of his major contributions seems initially implausible. Forced to follow Locke's order of presentation, Leibniz, some participants suggested, is deprived of the opportunity to express his own views systematically, while at the same time, he often does not quite appreciate what Locke is aiming at with his new theory of "ideas". They see the book as a resource that can be mined for interesting material—for the arguments offered by "Theophile" against "Philelethe" are often very suggestive, hence the continuing interest of problems itemized above—while discounting its significance as a free-standing philosophical edifice.

Other participants disagreed strenuously. They maintained that Leibniz's deeper preoccupations, his esteem for mathematics, his opposition to a secularized and relativized ethics and politics, come through more clearly in the *Nouveaux Essais* than in either his pure metaphysical essays and fragments or Leibniz's more esoteric works. They argued for the unity and coherence of the *Essais*, considered as a response to the threat to peace and harmony and the knowledge of things that Leibniz saw as proceeding from English philosophy.

There was general enthusiasm for the idea of a comprehensive bibliography of critical literature on the *Nouveaux Essais* to be undertaken in the future; at present the papers presented are being added to the conference website at [www.bib.umontreal.ca/colloqueNE](http://www.bib.umontreal.ca/colloqueNE). It is hoped that a 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference in 2104 will bring together an equally hardworking group of historians of philosophy in Montréal, or in another equally agreeable city.