

**Tristan Dagron, *Toland et Leibniz. L'Invention du néo-spinozisme*, Paris: Vrin 2009, 430 p.**

Reviewed by Mogens Lærke,  
University of Aberdeen/École Normale Supérieure de Lyon

Tristan Dagron's study of the relations between Leibniz and Toland is an impressive synthesis of a key controversy at the turn of the eighteenth century. Other work on the topic has appeared over the years, including in the present journal.<sup>1</sup> Before Dagron's study, however, the richness and depth of this philosophical encounter has not been fully appreciated. In the introduction, Dagron modestly explains that the intention of the book was to provide "some clarifications on the reception of the philosophies of Spinoza and Leibniz in the first years of the eighteenth century" (p. 7). In reality, *Toland et Leibniz* provides considerably more than that. By meticulously reconstructing the full context of the various exchanges between the two protagonists of the book, Dagron's book offers a splendid vista of the tightly knit network of intellectual relations between a long list of prominent *savants* in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Republic of Letters, including Spinoza, Locke, Bayle, LeClerc, Wachter, More, Conway, only to mention a few.

It is not primarily a book about Leibniz, but mainly motivated by an interest in Toland and, in the background, Giordano Bruno.<sup>2</sup> Previous commentators on the topic, most of whom are either Leibniz or Spinoza specialists, have had a tendency to cast Toland as a kind of clumsy Spinozist, and certainly not an intellect of Leibniz's caliber.<sup>3</sup> Dagron has a considerably more sophisticated view of the Irish philosopher. He reads him as a penetrating critic of Spinoza whose pantheistic intuitions he adopts while taking a critical stance towards the basically mechanistic and Cartesian framework within which Spinoza formulated his philosophical program. Looking backwards, Dagron considers Toland an heir to Giordano Bruno and a philosopher with deeper roots in Platonism than in Epicurianism. Looking ahead, Dagron stresses the importance of Toland for the formation of the vitalistic materialism that dominated the "radical" wing of the late eighteenth century French Enlightenment (Diderot, d'Holbach, La Mettrie, et al.) Hence the reference to the "invention of neo-Spinozism" in the subtitle of the book. Throughout the book, Dagron thus narrates the story of how Bruno's Platonism found its way into the French Enlightenment through Toland, showing the origins and repercussions of

the attempt to invest Spinozism with anti-mechanistic notions of force and form characterizing the Irishman's original brand of pantheism.

In the elaboration of this very complex story about Toland's pivotal role in the development of early modern radical philosophy, Leibniz takes on the role as a privileged opponent and sparring partner of Toland. The succession of their philosophical encounters structures the book and governs the order in which Dagron approaches the different aspects of Toland's philosophy and their genesis. The author thus follows the elaboration of Toland's doctrine from the time Leibniz first speaks of Toland's *Life of Milton* (1698) in his correspondence with Burnett in 1701 to the debates between Toland with Leibniz around the *Christianity not Mysterious* (1696) in the first years of the eighteenth century, and later those around the *Letters to Serena* (1704).

The scope of Dagron's argumentation is very wide and involves the consideration of an astounding number of intellectual positions in the early modern Republic of Letters. To give an example, in chapter 7, Dagron depicts the philosophies of Toland and Leibniz as two competing ways in which early eighteenth century philosophy re-appropriated the notion of form earlier decried by Cartesianism: "[We can] characterize the materialism of the Enlightenment thinkers as the effect of a reinterpretation of the notion of "form" initiated by Toland. In competition, really, with the Leibnizian "reform" which is oriented towards a hypostatic reinterpretation of the substantial soul [...], the objections of remark L provides the logical and speculative weapons in a materialist re-appropriation of Newton's natural philosophy [...]" (p. 175). This passage bears specifically on Toland's objections to Bayle's views on the relation between matter and sentiment as developed in the remark L of the article "Dicéarque" in the 1702 edition of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. It is, however, representative of Dagron's approach. The focus is on the genesis and impact of Toland's views and the development of his particular strand of materialism. Leibniz takes on the secondary role as a privileged interlocutor and opponent. It also illustrates well the contextual complexity that characterizes Dagron's analyses. In just one sentence, he juggles the positions of Toland, Leibniz, Newton, Bayle and, implicitly, Spinoza. The conceptual development of Toland and Leibniz's respective philosophical positions is meticulously worked out taking departure from a detailed account of their concrete exchanges on a variety of topics. Focusing in this way on the study of concrete controversies (as opposed to studying works, arguments, or other) is not in itself methodologically innovative but represents a very popular approach in current historiography of

## REVIEW OF DAGRON

philosophy.<sup>4</sup> The force of Dagron's approach, however, lies in his resistance to isolating controversies or limiting the scope of his investigation to direct exchanges between the authors in question. Other controversies, philosophers, and books always loom in the background, informing the exchange. Moreover, Dagron shows how the controversies have (and surely was intended by the participants to have) repercussions in other controversies. On Dagron's picture, then, there are no isolated exchanges, but only complex strategic set-ups of interrelated controversies. The various authors elaborate their respective positions in response to the others, their philosophies becoming what they are by adopting, confronting, correcting, excluding or integrating other positions. Determining the meaning of some text of some author is then nothing but determining the role the text plays as a concrete intervention in contemporary debates and situating the author in a complex network of intellectual positions actually in play at the time. The upshot of this kind of contextual positioning is, to return to the particular passage quoted above, the precise determination of Toland's position as someone who re-appropriates Newton and is in competition with Leibniz when it comes to the rehabilitation of the notion of "form."

Pierre Bayle writes in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* that "he who speaks of matter, speaks of the theater of all sorts of changes, the battlefield of contrary causes, the subject of corruptions and all generations [...]" (1702 edition, art. "Spinoza", rem. N.) Dagron stages the history of philosophy exactly as such a concrete "theater of all sorts of changes" and hereby represents a kind of materialist approach to the study of controversies. A good example of this materialist approach is provided in the chapter devoted to Johann Georg Wachter, author of two books on Spinoza and the Cabala, the *Spinozismus im Judenthumb* (1699) and the *Elucidarius cabalisticus* (1706). At first sight, the esoteric writings of this cabalistico-spinozist could appear of little importance for understanding the controversy between Leibniz and Toland on the question of the nature of matter. This false impression is however quickly dispelled once the following facts are brought to light: Wachter's *Elucidarius cabalisticus*, published in 1706, was in fact written in 1702, at the time when Toland, Leibniz, and Wachter were all in Berlin. Wachter's manuscript circulated among intellectuals and he had acquired a certain reputation as a *connoisseur* of Spinoza's philosophy. Indeed, the "Gentleman in Holland" to whom the fourth of Toland's *Letters to Serena* is addressed, and which contains his famous "refutation" of Spinoza, was probably none other than Wachter.<sup>5</sup> This explains why the "Spinozism" Toland rejects in the *Letters* is of a kind that

strongly evokes the reading of Spinoza presented by Wachter and why his reading today comes through to Spinoza scholars as a clumsy and inadequate account of Spinoza's authentic doctrine. For this reason, we cannot properly understand Toland's criticism of Spinoza unless we take into account Wachter's reading of Spinoza and even less understand Leibniz's criticism of Toland's *Letters* unless we also take into account his commentary on Wachter's *Elucidarius* in the so-called *Réfutation inédite de Spinoza* (approx. 1707).<sup>6</sup> By reconstructing such complex scenarios, Dagron provides a map of how the philosophies of the period were related concretely and dynamically, that is to say materially, as theoretical positions mutually defining each other on an intellectual "battlefield of contrary causes."

*Toland et Leibniz* has been preceded by considerable work in text edition, including a critical edition of an early eighteenth century French manuscript translation of Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious* and a critical edition of an anonymous French translation of the *Letters to Serena* held at the University of Helsinki.<sup>7</sup> The latter volume also contains a number of related documents. Of considerable interest for Leibniz scholars is here a complete edition of the *Parallèle entre la raison originale ou la loi de la nature*. This text, which only exists in a manuscript written in Leibniz's hand, was first published in a partial version by Gaston Grua in his *Textes inédits* (Grua, 46-61). Ever since, it has caused vexation for Leibniz scholars, because it contains statements that fit uneasily with Leibniz's position on natural and revealed religion as stated elsewhere. Dagron has convincingly solved the mystery by demonstrating that the text is in fact a French translation by Leibniz of a text by Toland originally written in English. In his book, Dagron furthermore suggests that Toland intended the text to be an indirect response to Leibniz's *Annotatiuncula subitanae ad librum de Christianismo Mysteriis carente* (1701), an extended commentary on Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious*.<sup>8</sup>

Mogens Lærke

CERPHI

ENS de Lyon (site Descartes)

15, parvis René-Descartes

BP 7000

69342 LYON cedex 07

France

mogenslaerke@hotmail.com

or

University of Aberdeen  
Philosophy department  
Old Brewery  
High Street  
Aberdeen AB24 3UB  
Scotland, United Kingdom  
m.laerke@abdn.ac.uk

Notes

<sup>1</sup> For some examples, see F.H. Heinemann, “Toland and Leibniz,” in *The Philosophical Review* 54:5 (1945), 437-57; G. Carabelli, “J. Toland and G.W. Leibniz: otto lettere,” in *Revista critica di storia della filosofia* 29 (1974), 412-31; G. Tognon, “Leibniz, Toland et Spinoza : une lettre inédite à propos des *Lettres à Serena*,” in *Bulletin de l'Association des amis de Spinoza* 12 (1984), 2-11; R.S. Woolhouse, “John Toland and ‘Remarques critiques sur le Système de Monsr. Leibnitz de l’Harmonie préétablie’,” in *Leibniz Society Review* 8 (1998), 80-87; M. Fichant, “Leibniz et Toland: philosophie pour princesses?” in *Revue de Synthèse* 4 (1995), 421-39; A. Lamarra, “An anonymous criticism from Berlin to Leibniz’s philosophy: John Toland against Mathematical Abstractions,” in *Studia Leibnitiana*, Sonderheft 16 (1998), 89-102; M.R. Antognazza, “Natural and Supernatural Mysteries : Leibniz’s *Annotatiunculæ subitaneæ* on Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious*,” in *VII. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongress. Nihil sine Ratione*, Berlin 2001, 17-24. A text by Stewart Duncan entitled “Toland, Leibniz, and Active Matter” is forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> Dagron has also published substantive work on Bruno, notably *Unité de l’être et dialectique : l’idée de philosophie naturelle chez Giordano Bruno*, Paris: Vrin 1999.

<sup>3</sup> For an example, see Rienk Vermij, “Matter and Motion: Toland and Spinoza,” in W. van Bunge et W. Klever (éds.), *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700*, Leiden: E.J. Brill 1996, 275-90.

<sup>4</sup> Marcelo Dascal’s work is an example well-known to Leibnizians (cf. Leibniz, *The Art of Controversies*, Dordrecht: Springer 2006, and M. Dascal (ed.), *The Practice of Reason. Leibniz and his Controversies*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin 2010). Jonathan Israel also stresses the importance of the study

controversies in intellectual history in *Enlightenment Contested*, Oxford: Oxford UP 2006, p. 23-25, in particular p. 25: “Contemporary controversies, then, major and minor, are the pivot, the means to grasp not just intellectual history in its proper perspective but, more importantly, the real relationship between the social sphere and ideas.” The AGON project at the Sorbonne is an institutional example of the current broad interest in current research on the study of controversies (<http://www.agon.paris-sorbonne.fr>).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Toland, *Letters to Serena*, London 1704, Letter IV: “A Letter to a Gentleman from Holland, showing SPINOZA’s System of Philosophy to be without any Principle or Foundation;”

<sup>6</sup> This inappropriate title was given to the text by Foucher de Careil. Philip Beeley has reedited the original Latin text under the title “J.-G. Wachteri de recondita Hebraeorum philosophia (1706),” *The Leibniz Review* 12 (2002), 1-14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Toland, *Le Christianisme sans mystères*, ed. T. Dagron, Paris: Champion 2004, and *Lettres à Serena et autres textes*, ed. T. Dagron, Paris: Champion 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Leibniz’s text was written in 1701 and first published in vol. II of Des Maizeaux’s *Collection of Several Pieces of Mr. John Toland* from 1726.