

***The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence.* Translated, edited, and with an Introduction by Brandon C. Look and Donald Rutherford. New Haven and London: Yale University Press (= The Yale Leibniz Series). Lxxix + 477pp.**

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I. Introduction

Sometimes even within the accepted conventions of seventeenth-century correspondence things had to be spelled out. Reflecting on the unsystematic character of his epistolary exchanges with Bartholomaeus Des Bosses (1668-1738) on philosophical matters, Leibniz left the Jesuit theologian in no doubt that he would not approve of his suggestion of publishing some of his letters in the journal *Mémoires de Trévoux*: “I have written these things for you, namely for the wise, not for one and all” (82/83). Des Bosses duly dropped the idea and the two men’s correspondence remained essentially private. Although some of the letters have been subsequently published by Dutens, Gerhardt and Blondel, it is only now through the latest volume in the Yale Leibniz series, painstakingly prepared by Brandon Look and Don Rutherford, that we can begin to assess fully the enormous riches which the correspondence contains.

Leibniz and Des Bosses began their exchanges in January 1706. Over the course of the next 10 years at least 138 letters passed between the two men; of these, a total of 71 letters which the editors find to be most significant philosophically have found their way into the present volume. Even allowing for the problems of making a selection of this kind, the edition provides remarkable insight into the various topics which Leibniz and Des Bosses discussed alongside their well-known exchanges on metaphysics which justifiably rank among the most important in the whole Leibnizian corpus.

From a purely philosophical point of view, the Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence stands out for its detailed and indeed convoluted discussion of the substantial bond (*vinculum substantiale*) which Leibniz proposes as a means to explaining the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation on the broad basis of his doctrine of monads. But as the editors correctly point out in their long and instructive Introduction, careful inspection of the letters gathered in the volume allows us to recognize that the substantial bond constitutes over and above this an essential part of Leibniz’s continuing efforts to resolve problems concerning the nature of

corporeal substance – to the extent that the *vinculum substantiale* is conceived as an entity with a capacity to unite a plurality of monads in a single composite substance. Nor is this a one-sided dialogue. Leibniz develops, reformulates, and indeed revises his views during years of correspondence on account of the incisive and often critical comments of Des Bosses. A remark which Leibniz makes early on in his exchanges remains true at least in respect of the strength of the counter-arguments he received: “although I am myself certain of all my views, I nevertheless love plausible objections” (44/45).

II. The importance of Jesuits in early modern science

The Leibniz-Des Bosses correspondence allows us to reflect once more on the central role played by members of the Jesuit order in the intellectual life of early modern Europe. Des Bosses regularly conveyed letters and books to fellow Jesuits such as René-Joseph Tournemine (1661-1739), the founder of the *Mémoires de Trévoux*, and Giovanni Battista Tolomei (1653-1726), and in return was able to provide Leibniz with a steady flow of information on the conflict with the Jansenists or news from China.

Leibniz had of course been intimately acquainted with the significance of the Jesuit attacks on the Jansenists through his dealings with Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694), who following the papal Bull *Cum occasione* was banned from the Sorbonne for his Jansenist teachings and fled into exile in the Low Countries. By the time of the Des Bosses correspondence a second wave of attacks had forced Pasquier Quesnel (1634-1719) to leave France following publication of his *Nouveau Testament en françois, avec des reflexions morales sur chaque verset* (1693), the so-called *Moral Reflexions*. Quesnel resided for a short time with the ageing Arnauld before being arrested in Brussels and then imprisoned by the Archbishop of Malines; fortunately, he was able to escape and later find refuge in Amsterdam.

According to the Jesuits, whose own views had been considered by Cornelius Jansen (1510-1576) to be not far removed from Pelagianism, seventeenth-century Jansenism amounted to little more than Calvinism. Not only did Jansenists deny free-will and its operation in the acceptance or rejection of divine grace, they also held that only an elect few were predestined for salvation and that the rest were condemned to eternal damnation.

Just as Leibniz found Arnauld’s position on questions such as efficacious grace

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by no means completely reprehensible and instead argued consistently for tolerance and freedom of thought in theological matters (see pp. 80/81, 96/97, 98/99), so too did he believe that a careful and true analysis of the Jansenist-Jesuit dispute on the freedom of the will would allow this dispute to be resolved (xxxiii; GP VI, 332-3). In view of Quesnel's attempts to revive the doctrines of Jansen following his escape to Amsterdam, Leibniz displays his deep humanity: "I believe he has become embittered by the harshness with which he has been treated. If only the learned could be persuaded to exercise moderation in their battles with each other" (62/63, var.).

In fact, Des Bosses never received these lines, which Leibniz on reflection probably considered too conciliatory; they are handed down to us in the draft from which the editors quote extensively. In a similar vein, Leibniz proceeds to emphasize the importance of publishing Quesnel's and Arnauld's papers which had come into the hands of the Jesuit order. Among these papers he suspects there would be many "that could illuminate the religious and literary history of our time" (62/63, var.), before adding the rider that this labour be carried out by one "who loves moderation and the public good". Such a publication would "aim more at the advancement of the reader than at the oppression of opponents" (*ibid.*). In the final version rather more sober language was used: "It is said that many of his (sc. Quesnel's) writings, including all the letters that Arnauld and Quesnel himself exchanged with others over many years, have come into the hands of your order. I should like to see selections from these published, but more those that contribute to the common good than to the arming of enemies" (64/65).

Many of Leibniz's best correspondents on topics in mathematics and the physical sciences were Jesuit scholars and in one of his letters to Des Bosses, written four years before his death, he refers to an earlier wish he had had for collaboration with members of the Jesuit order in investigating a topic which had interested him since his youth: the nature of magnetism. As he writes in a postscript to his letter of 15 February 1712, after William Gilbert (1544-1603), who had laid the foundations of magnetic theory, no-one had contributed more to observations on magnetism than members of the Jesuit order such as Nicolas Cabej (1586-1650), Athanasius Kircher (1601/2-1680), and Vincent Léotaud (1595-1672). Had observations been made in the past of magnetic horizontal declination and vertical inclination, he writes, "we would today have a repository of observations, from which it could perhaps be conjectured and predicted, at least for several years, what the variations should be in many places" (230/231). But what in the past has been neglected can

often in the present be righted, or as Leibniz puts it: “just as we plant trees for future generations, or at least take precautions lest anyone many years henceforth could with justice complain about the neglect of the present as we now do about that of the past” (ibid.). For this reason, Leibniz suggests that Des Bosses take up the matter with Tolomei, rector of the Collegium Romanum.

Perhaps because this approach did not prove fruitful (Tolomei was created cardinal by Pope Clement XI in May 1712 and was thereafter involved particularly in preparing the condemnation of the ideas of Quesnel), he turned to the Dutch mathematician and natural philosopher Nicolas Hartsoeker (1656-1725), with whom he had conducted much of his correspondence through the loyal hands of Des Bosses. Leibniz had a question concerning magnetism which he wanted to have settled by experiment. Not having the facilities himself and being in any case in bad health, he desired that the experiment, the details of which he set out in his letter to Des Bosses of 15 March 1715, be carried out by Hartsoeker instead. Moreover, Hartsoeker was to be kept in the quiet for whom the experiment was really to be conducted: the request was to be made under the guise of its having originated from Des Bosses and not from Leibniz (330/331). Evidently Des Bosses’s attempt at hiding Leibniz’s identity did not prevent suspicion from being raised and therefore, Leibniz, in his letter to Des Bosses of 19 April 1715, combined a request for an extension to the experiment with one for renewed efforts to conceal his identity (see Hartsoeker’s response, GP II, 513-14). As if this were not bad enough, Leibniz all this time continued to exchange letters with Hartsoeker on magnetism and to profit from the Dutchman’s expertise on this topic.

III. Leibniz, the Jesuits and China

By the time the correspondence with Des Bosses began, Leibniz was already an authority on China, having published his *Novissima Sinica*, based on a series of Jesuit reports, in 1697. Leibniz was particularly eager to hear from Des Bosses, who was in regular contact with Tolomei in Rome, on developments in the dispute over Chinese rites. Many members of the Jesuit order agreed with the position of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) that rites carried out by the Chinese in honour of their ancestors and Confucius were civil in nature and that they were therefore reconcilable with the Christian faith. Leibniz was essentially of the same opinion and thus feared that if the pontiff called upon Christians in China to abandon the honours which they traditionally showed the Jesuit mission would fail (208/209).

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As we learn from the letter Des Bosses wrote to Leibniz on 31 July 1709, Tolomei approved of Leibniz's views on the Chinese rites and desired to receive a copy of *Novissima Sinica* (136/137). Des Bosses supposed the reason for this to be "that it might become known in Rome what learned and moderate Protestants think about the Chinese situation" (ibid.). In fact, a large part of the Roman Catholic hierarchy at this time did not consider the Chinese rites to be consistent with the Christian faith, deeming such cults rather to be idolatrous.

In his letter to Des Bosses of 13 January 1716, Leibniz announces that he is putting the finishing touches to his *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois*, which he wrote for his friend Nicolas Remond (?-1716) – the work was, however, still incomplete at Leibniz's death. Leibniz felt that there was an essential harmony between Christianity and Chinese natural theology, such as in the belief in a just creator, embodying the concepts of goodness and wisdom. According to Leibniz nominal pagans such as the Chinese were, precisely on account of their correct natural theology, able to achieve salvation as members of one universal church. As Leibniz explains to Des Bosses, he is able to show in the *Discours* that any attempt to prove the Chinese guilty of atheism is fundamentally flawed. Even more than the ancient Greeks, he writes, the ancient Chinese "seem to have come near to the truth, and seem to have taught that matter itself is the production of God" (358/359).

IV. The problem of free will and the *Theodicy*

While China is a topic which repeatedly comes up in correspondence with Des Bosses, questions concerning Leibniz's *Essais de théodicée* pervade it from beginning to end. This work was conceived and written during the period in which the correspondence took place and Des Bosses who on one occasion describes himself as being certainly Leibniz's "most devoted follower and loyal to the grave" (216/217) translated it from French into Latin. Work on the translation was conducted under the author's supervision. Sometimes Des Bosses asked Leibniz's advice on how best to render certain words or passages in Latin. Leibniz for his part did not hold back in praise, calling Des Bosses's translation on occasion "beautiful" (266/267) and "excellent" (338/339). However, this praise was evidently accorded more for philological accuracy than for elegance. As Leibniz also remarks, Des Bosses, as a faithful translator, "stuck rather closely to the French" (338/339). In consequence, he says from time to time "something or other seemed awkward in

the Latin that made it appear to be a translation” (340/341).

Not surprisingly, the two men often discussed the question of free will which plays such a prominent part in the *Theodicy*. In one of his earlier letters to Des Bosses, Leibniz sets out his objections to the “indifference of equilibrium”, stating “I believe that freedom must be saved not only from compulsion but also from necessity, yet not from infallibility or determination, for there must always be a reason why one thing rather than another happens, and there is never an indifference of perfect equilibrium” (106/107). Opposing this view, Des Bosses contends that there is a genuine sense of the power of determining oneself which does not imply contradiction. In doing so, he cites the influential Jesuit author Luis de Molina (1535-1600) for whom the concept of free will explicitly involved the denial of prior causes that determine the will to act one way or another. For Molina, the will possesses genuine freedom which crucially allows it to be exercised in the acceptance or rejection of grace (196/197).

On this basis, Des Bosses points to several pages in the *Theodicy* where Leibniz seems to commit himself to the moral necessity of sinful acts (202/203). Starting out from a concept of free will similar to that of Molina, he states that to determine oneself without a cause implies a contradiction. Thus, Adam, if he had obeyed God, would have determined himself without a cause, since, as Des Bosses supposes, “a motive for sinning was represented to him that was stronger than the motive for obeying” (204/205). Des Bosses proceeds to compare Leibniz’s position with that of his fellow Jesuit Gabriel Vasquez (1549-1604), but finds that the latter is better equipped to meet his objections.

In responding Leibniz takes recourse to his metaphysics, according to which “everything in things is in some way pre-established, and the past is pregnant with the future” (210/211). As he points out to Des Bosses, the predetermination involved in the act of sinning does not make God the author of Adam’s sin. Instead, the reason why such an Adam as he was and was to become was admitted into existence was that he was a constituent part of the best of all possible worlds (ibid; see also 44/45, var.). The concept of evil is thus subsumed under the concept of perfection: “In my judgment,” he writes, “unless there were a best series, God clearly would have created nothing, since he cannot act without a reason, or prefer the less perfect to the more perfect alternative” (212/213).

V. Infinity and the continuum

From early on Des Bosses sought to accommodate the core of Leibniz's ideas to the doctrines of Aristotle and both with the dogmas of the Roman Catholic church. In many ways this project coincided with the conciliatory nature of the thought of the Hanoverian philosopher, who as he himself points out at the beginning of the correspondence had "always felt it preferable to reform received opinions than to overthrow them" (10/11). In his letter of 14 February 1706, Leibniz agrees with Des Bosses on the validity of fundamental Aristotelian principles such as that being and one are convertible, that unity is a principle of number, and that a continuum is infinitely divisible (20/21). However, on the basis of the plenitude of the world and the uniform divisibility of matter as well as the laws of motion, he underlines his conviction in contrast to Aristotle, that there is an actual infinity in nature (*ibid.*). This is an oblique reference to his concept of the actual division of matter into infinity, but he does not spell this out. Instead he writes a somewhat cryptic postscript to the letter: "Since monads or principles of substantial unity are everywhere in matter, it follows from this that there is also an actual infinity, for there is no part, or part of a part, that does not contain monads" (24/25).

In a letter written in the following month, Leibniz makes clear that this is an actual infinity which is not to be understood as constituting a whole, but rather as something that cannot be enumerated. In talking of the infinite aggregate in nature it is, he suggests, more accurate to say that "more things are present than can be expressed by any number" than to speak of an "infinite number" (32/33). Then it is an infinite which is not a whole and to which therefore no formal unity can be ascribed, in contrast to the absolute and indivisible infinity of God, which alone has a true unity (32/33; see also 52/53). As Leibniz points out, neither the infinitely small magnitudes which he employs in mathematics, nor the infinitely large magnitudes stand in contradiction to this view, since he considers both to be fictions of the mind, born from abbreviated ways of expression, and suitable for calculation in the way that imaginary roots in algebra are. In addition, he has, he writes, demonstrated that these expressions have great usefulness for shortening thinking and therefore for discovery, and that "they cannot lead to error, since it would suffice to substitute for the infinitely small as small a magnitude as one wishes, so that the error would be less than any given, whence it follows that there is no error" (32/33).

Building on his earlier account, Leibniz then distinguishes the syncategorematic

infinite which obtains in nature and the hypercategorematic infinite which he identifies with God. Whereas the former has parts which allow the possibility of further progress by dividing, multiplying, subtracting, or adding, the latter has parts only eminently, but neither formally nor actually. In contrast, he rejects the possibility of an absolute or categorematic infinite, understood as having infinite parts formally (52/53). Although this is a distinction he seldom makes elsewhere in his writings, it agrees exactly with his standard account of the infinite which is inextricably linked to his solution to the problem of the composition of the continuum. Thus space is “something indefinite, like every continuum whose parts are not actual but can be taken at will” (140/141). And while on the one side space is something continuous, but ideal, on the other side mass is discrete, an actual multitude, or a being by aggregation, but one from infinite unities: “In actual things simples are prior to aggregates; in ideal things the whole is prior to the part. Neglect of this consideration has produced the labyrinth of the continuum” (ibid.).

VI. Corporeal substance and the *vinculum substantiale*

The best-known sections of the correspondence between Leibniz and Des Bosses are undoubtedly those devoted to the nature of substance and body, which in part grew out of their shared interest in explaining the possibility of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation on the basis of Leibniz’s metaphysics. Clearly Leibniz valued Des Bosses as a discussion partner, because he forced him to reconsider his views on some of the most fundamental parts of his philosophy. Indeed, through discussing how transubstantiation might be possible in an ontology founded on monads, Leibniz came to reconsider the status of corporeal substances, according to which living creatures are constituted by organic bodies and immaterial souls. For this reason the Leibniz-Des Bosses correspondence is able to throw light on one of the most disputed questions with which Leibniz scholars are today concerned: whether Leibniz upheld the existence of embodied living creatures or whether he ultimately rejected them in favor of a form of idealism, in which the ultimate reality of all things except monads is denied.

In their excellent Introduction, the editors sketch the background to this contemporary discussion, the origins of which they find in the *Discours de métaphysique* and the correspondence with Arnauld, where Leibniz in opposition to the Cartesian concept of matter develops a theory of substance in which intrinsic unity, a principle of force or action, and the possession of a complete concept

are among defining characteristics (xxxix). In the 1680s Leibniz seems to have accepted that substance could be an animated body whose active power is an appetitive principle and whose passive power is the subject of its embodiment. On this basis two different positions emerge, which although not contradictory are not immediately reconcilable. In some of the letters with Arnauld, Leibniz appears to develop a concept of secondary matter composed of an aggregate of corporeal substances, while on other occasions he evidently puts forward a view in which it is the substantial form through which a corporeal substance becomes a *unum per se* (xli). From the latter position, which the editors call “the unity view”, the idealism of the theory of monads can be seen to emerge, whereas the former position, “the composite view”, in later years recedes into the background. But it does not completely disappear. By the beginning of the correspondence with Des Bosses, Leibniz had come to accept that the only ultimate real things in terms of which the existence of everything was to be explained are unextended, soul-like monads. Nevertheless, Leibniz still occasionally experimented with the composite view of old, assuming that monads alone could not explain completely the nature of corporeal substances (xlix).

As Leibniz was aware, if there were to be corporeal substances, something had to be added to the harmonized perceptions of monads in order to make sense of the union of soul with the other subordinated monads of its body. To this end, he took recourse to a further substantial bond which he eventually called a “*vinculum substantiale*”. In a draft to one of his earliest letters to Des Bosses, that of 14 February 1706, Leibniz admits that he has difficulty in explaining the union of the different simple substances or monads existing in us so as to make one thing from them. Already here he suggests that it is not sufficiently clear how, “in addition to the existence of individual monads, there may arise a new existing thing, unless they are joined by the bond of a continuous thing that the phenomena display to us” (22/23, var.). In another letter, written shortly afterwards, he draws attention to the semi-mental nature of this bond: “Being and one are convertible, but just as there is being by aggregation, so also there is one by aggregation, although this entity and unity are semi-mental” (30/31).

In contrast to the position he had earlier set out in the *Système nouveau*, Leibniz now emphasizes that it is inappropriate to consider souls in points, for they are rather present through their effects (124/125; see also 92/93, 128/129). At the same time, the union of body and soul cannot be explained by the doctrine of pre-established harmony, for this explains only the agreement between bodily

motions and perceptions (50/51). By means of the *vinculum substantiale* Leibniz believes he is able to give a plausible account of composite substances, understood as constituting a per se unity composed of a soul and an organic body, which itself is a machine of nature resulting from monads (234/235). Conceived as an effect not only of the divine intellect but also of the divine will, the substantial bond unites those monads that are under the domination of one monad: “And in this consists the metaphysical bond of soul and body, which constitute one complete substance” (232/233).

Leibniz was, however, attracted to the *vinculum substantiale* not only for the systematic reason of rendering the concept of corporeal substance more plausible, but also – and perhaps primarily – as a means to providing a possible account of transubstantiation. For a Lutheran like Leibniz only the real presence of Christ when the bread and wine are received need be explained. Providing a possible explanation of the Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist was for Leibniz philosophically far more challenging. He accepted that sense could be made of the transformation of bread and wine into the substance of Christ only if corporeal substances are deemed to exist in addition to monads. If there were such substances, then at the moment of consecration, God could be held to destroy the corporeal substances of the bread and the wine by destroying their substantial bonds and by replacing them with the substantial bond of the corporeal substance of Christ (see 296/297). Since the substantial bond was conceived by Leibniz thereby to be only naturally, not essentially a bond, it required monads, but without involving them essentially (366/367). There could thus be a genuine change of substance on the one hand with no accompanying change to the monads or their phenomena on the other hand.

Repeatedly challenged by Des Bosses, who argued that what is added to the monads must be an accident or mode (see for example 236/237), Leibniz modified his position during the course of their correspondence. Indeed, there were sufficient changes for Leibniz on one occasion to express concern that the things he had written earlier might not cohere (340/341). Eventually taking the *vinculum substantiale* to be naturally incorruptible (318/319), he endowed it with a primitive active and passive force so that the bond itself became the principle of action of the composite substance, stating that “he who admits this corporeal substance [...] will also admit this bond” (348/349).

By means of the *vinculum substantiale* Leibniz found that he was able to achieve almost complete reconciliation between his position and Aristotelian doctrine – apart

from the fact that Aristotle did not admit monads. He also found it to be a source of what he calls “real continuity”, which he says can only come about through a substantial bond (370/371). On the assumption of the existence of monads alone, he contends, either bodies would be mere phenomena or a continuum would arise from points (*ibid.*). Of course he accepts that the latter would be absurd, but apart from this he provides no systematic grounds for the need for real continuity. On the contrary, he makes clear that the doctrine of monads, entailing that composites are mere phenomena and that extension is nothing but a phenomenon resulting from co-ordinated simultaneous appearances is precisely the means whereby “all the controversies concerning the composition of the continuum would cease” (*ibid.*).

Accordingly, Leibniz presents Des Bosses with two alternatives, both of which are consistent with the theory of monads: either bodies are mere phenomena and monads alone are real with the union supplied by the perceiving soul, or, “if faith drives us to corporeal substances”, the substance consists in the unifying reality which adds something absolute (and therefore substantial) to the things unified (226/227). Crucially, only the core metaphysics, the doctrine of monads allows Leibniz to overcome the labyrinth of the continuum (see 254/255), whereas the doctrine of corporeal substance allows perhaps a more satisfactory account of living things. As Leibniz points out in his letter to Des Bosses of 28 April 1712, the unity of corporeal substances arises from a superadded bond, “through which nothing is changed at all in the monads themselves” (256/257). However, the standard metaphysics implies a different understanding of subordination in the organic whole: “But considered in terms of the monads themselves, domination and subordination consist only in degrees of perception” (*ibid.*).

VII. Conclusion

The editors point out that despite the fact that the correspondence with Des Bosses extends to the final years of Leibniz’s life, we do not find in it a definitive statement of his metaphysics (lxxxix). But perhaps such a wish is misguided. There can, I think, be no doubt that the doctrine of monads in its idealistic sense was Leibniz’s final metaphysics, not least because it enabled him to overcome the labyrinth of the continuum, and to achieve so much more besides. But Leibniz never strove to establish a definitive system as such – this would smack too much of the dogmatism he abhorred. By allowing different approaches to different topics and to different authors, his philosophy took on an almost quintessential flexibility. Indeed, he

makes this quite clear in respect of the question of corporeal substance, when in his letter to Des Bosses of 15 March 1715 he writes: “We correctly maintain that bodies are things, for even phenomena are real. But if someone wishes to maintain that bodies are substances, it will require, I believe, some new principle of real union” (330/331). On Leibnizian terms, the claim that the doctrine of corporeal substance is required in order to uphold the reality of animals and plants is deeply flawed, as some of us have argued all along.

As the foregoing remarks should make clear, this new edition of the correspondence between Leibniz and Des Bosses is a major contribution to scholarship which will substantially inform debate on the later period of Leibniz’s thought. Furthermore, this is likely to be the best edition of that correspondence for many years to come. All the letters have been re-edited on the basis of the original manuscripts or copies thereof and the standard both of the Latin text and of the English translation is excellent throughout – as we have come to expect from the Yale Leibniz series. The volume is rounded off with a very useful catalogue of the Leibniz-Des Bosses correspondence, giving details of all the extant letters, their manuscript sources and previous editions. Extensive endnotes, containing a wealth of information, provide valuable commentary on the letters themselves. And the letters are also well indexed according to names and subjects.

Points of criticism are few. It would perhaps have been preferable to employ explanations in the text rather than in the endnotes when, for example, the chronology is apparently changed (168/169). The sequence of letters in a correspondence edition is so important that the reader should not have to hunt through endnotes in order to find out why it has been broken. Equally, the use of formulaic transcription for the variant readings is always bound to be problematic with an author like Leibniz, for they soon become ambiguous once a high level of textual complexity is reached. But these are only minor points in relation to the magnificent achievement which this new volume represents and for which the editors are to be unreservedly congratulated.

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