

Stuart Brown (ed.), *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy (1646-76)*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999. Pp. xii + 314.

Reviewed by Samuel Levey, Dartmouth College

Interest in Leibniz's early philosophical writings has been on the rise in recent years, and to the growing literature on the subject we can now add an excellent volume of papers edited by Stuart Brown. *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy* collects articles from a dozen leading authors on a variety of topics, plus a substantial introductory chapter by the editor that provides an overview of Leibniz's life and works from 1646 to 1676. The essays originate from a 1996 conference at Woburn College in Bedfordshire, and they have all been polished to stand as fully articulated works of scholarship for this publication.

The volume's portrait of the early philosophy of Leibniz is marked by its emphasis on theology. Three articles address it centrally, taking up transubstantiation, the conception of God, and the theological ideas behind the concept of harmony in Leibniz's philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Two further articles include theology at least as a major theme, one detailing Leibniz's inheritance of a conciliatory methodology and the influence of the *prisca theologia* in the philosophy of his day, the other exploring his millenarian views.<sup>2</sup> The remaining seven papers are, by contrast, far less connected in their particular topics, covering ethics, the application of mathematics to nature, vortical physics and theory of mind, historical truth, sufficient reason and freedom, possible worlds and monadology.<sup>3</sup> Although this latter diversity indicates some of the scope of Leibniz's early philosophical interests, as a whole the collection feels a bit heavily weighted on one side. Still, there is no denying the theological tilt in young Leibniz's philosophy itself, and the concentration it receives here may prove to be an asset by making the volume a special resource in that area.

The authors bring a variety of interpretive strategies to the texts, exploring Leibniz's philosophical thought from within and without, attending to its precursors and intellectual origins as well as to the structure of its positions, the problems it attempts to solve and the doctrines and principles which it aims to uphold. *The Young Leibniz* is especially rich in its discussions of Leibniz's intellectual context: Johann Adam Scherzer, Jakob Thomasius, Erhard Weigel, Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld, Hugo Grotius and Ehrenfried Walter von Tschirnhaus, for example, are all brought instructively and substantially into the mix alongside the more prominent names of Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Arnauld, Cordemoy and Gassendi. The

individual essays are threaded with references to many other contributors to the seventeenth-century conversations as well. This should make the volume of particular value to scholars pursuing broader historical projects in early modern philosophy, science and theology, and to those interested to pursue some of the less-studied figures of the period. There is, however, one respect in which the volume's examination of Leibniz is not as well-developed as perhaps it should be. With the notable exception of Parkinson's essay, readers will find in the volume rather little attention being paid to Leibniz's arguments. Of course the exegesis and analysis of argument is just one of many levers for opening doors onto the thought of a philosopher from history, and often enough it will be laid aside in favor of others. Yet it seems to me that, in this particular respect, *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy* is missing out on the young Leibniz and his philosophy, for the intelligence, subtlety and vitality of the arguments themselves are among the special pleasures of Leibniz's early works and are, in part, what make them so worthwhile.

In what follows, rather than attempt to describe each article, I shall mention just three as examples of the good work to be found in this collection.

Christia Mercer's essay explores the influence of Leibniz's teachers Scherzer, Thomasius and Weigel on his intellectual development and on the philosophical programmes he would later undertake. All three figures are, in Mercer's term, "conciliatory eclectics" who maintain that philosophical truth can be revealed in the study of ancient sources, especially Plato and Aristotle, despite the fact that those sources, besides conflicting among themselves, were pagan while the truth is consistent with Christian doctrine. Yet the truth is to be found in all places, if properly examined, and ideas from apparently conflicting schools of thought are to be melded together to yield a correct Christian metaphysics. The particularly romantic hypothesis that the ancient pagan texts actually contain hidden and deliberately obscured religious truths passed down from Moses, a doctrine known as the *prisca theologia* or ancient theology, was not broadly accepted by Leibniz's teachers, but each in his own way found an important role for ancient philosophy in the analysis and understanding of Biblical doctrine. Familiar elements of Leibniz's own philosophy appear in the work of these teachers: Scherzer's and Thomasius's embrace of the doctrine of the emanation of creatures from God, for example, or Weigel's view that modern mechanical explanation is to be reconciled with a hylomorphic analysis of bodies as compounds of form and matter. And of course the conciliatory outlook and the promotion of ancient authors is characteristic of Leibniz as well. Mercer makes a good case for finding the deep imprint of their methodologies in Leibniz's philosophy, using the 1668 text *De transsubstantiatione*

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as a nice case in point. Leibniz's attempt there to provide an account of transubstantiation that both Catholics and Protestants could accept advances a striking mixture of Aristotelian and Platonic metaphysical doctrines and makes a number of explicit references to the similarity of his proposal to those of ancient authors.

The recent appearance of G.H.R. Parkinson's translation volume, *G.W. Leibniz: De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers 1675-6* (Yale University Press, 1992), has done much to stoke interest in Leibniz's early writings, and many of the papers collected in *The Young Leibniz* record a clear debt to it. Parkinson's own contribution, however, attends instead to the early dialogue *Confessio Philosophi* (c. 1672-3), and examines the *Confessio*'s answer to the question whether human beings have free will—in particular the question whether the possibility of free will is threatened by the principle of sufficient reason. Leibniz offers two “proofs” of the principle, first on the ground that its denial “destroys the very distinction between existence and non-existence,” repeating an argument from an earlier work,<sup>4</sup> and second on the ground that it is presupposed by all the sciences. As Parkinson notes, this second proof falls short of a demonstration that the principle is *true*. In any event, it appears to be a consequence of the principle that any human action, say Judas's sinning, which arises from the agent's power to act and will to act, ultimately is the result of “external things” that govern our thoughts no less than they govern “the swerings and collisions of atoms” (A VI,3,132). And so the agent's will would seem not to be free. Leibniz's solution to this difficulty turns on the definition of free will, and in the *Confessio* he advances a number of suggestions, among them: that free will is the power of acting or not acting given all the “external requisites” of action; that freedom is spontaneity of action with choice, where “spontaneity” requires the principle of action to be internal to the agent and “choice” requires that the action be *rational* or arise from the proper use of reason; that freedom comes from knowledge; that the causes of action beyond the will of the agent regress infinitely. It is not clear that the *Confessio*'s discussions actually yield a single unified line of thought about freedom, and Parkinson does not force the various strands together, though he speculates that Leibniz may mean to work with a concept of freedom from ordinary life: to be free is to be able to do what one wants to do or to achieve one's ends, a power, on Leibniz's view, that belongs to an intellect unclouded by passions and so able properly to follow reason. For the most part Parkinson treats each suggestion independently, instructively weighing Leibniz's arguments and noting the variety of connections to Leibniz's ideas about freedom in the later writings.

Leibniz's “Egyptian plan” of the *Justa dissertatio* (1671-2) ends with a

millenarian vision: the proposed campaign of the Sun King against the Ottoman Empire wondrously flowers into the return of “the golden age of Christianity” in which we shall “move into the primitive Church” and “begin the most true millennium” (A VI,1,379f.). Is Leibniz serious here? In his article, Howard Hotson argues that millenarianism is an abiding feature of Leibniz’s own thought and that he genuinely considered the twentieth book of the Apocalypse as a prophesy of worldly progress, perhaps one being realized in his own times. But, at least after 1677, Leibniz apparently supports the “praeterist” position that holds the majority of apocalyptic prophesy to apply to events in the remote past, close to the time of the composition of the book of the Apocalypse itself. His reasons for this seem to have been to some degree pragmatic, for instance, to protect Catholicism, and at points Leibniz seems to undermine the praeterist position as well, opting for a more allegorical reading of some elements of the Apocalypse and thereby leaving it uncertain just how literally he believes the language of prophesy is to be understood. What is clear, in the light of Hotson’s fascinating discussion, is that millenarianism is not simply a feature of a strategic document fashioned by a young diplomat but rather is an important and lasting theme in the thinking of a mature philosopher and in that of many of his renowned seventeenth-century peers.

In general the authors have crafted pieces of high quality for *The Young Leibniz*, and Stuart Brown’s fine editorial work—which includes the addition of a chronology, bibliography and index—turns this collection of conference papers into a very useful instrument for research in the history of philosophy. I should think any reader of Leibniz will find much to learn and enjoy in its pages, and I am happy to recommend it.

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*Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> Respectively: Ursula Goldenbaum, Konrad Moll, Maria Rosa Antognazza.
- <sup>2</sup> Respectively: Christia Mercer, Howard Hotson.
- <sup>3</sup> Respectively: Francesco Piro, Phillip Beeley, Catherine Wilson, Daniel Cook, G.H.R. Parkinson, Mark Kulstad, Stuart Brown.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. “Demonstration of Primary Propositions,” A VI,2,483.