

**Christia Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics. Its Origins and Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xv + 528.**

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In recent years, the metaphysics of the young Leibniz has deservedly attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention. Among others, the collection of articles edited by Stuart Brown,<sup>1</sup> Antognazza's admirable book about Leibniz' views on the relation between theology and philosophy<sup>2</sup> and Philipp Beeley's rich work on Leibniz' physics<sup>3</sup> have all significantly helped us understanding the complex mind of the young Leibniz. Nevertheless, no one has hitherto dared to face the huge task of giving a synthetic account of Leibniz' metaphysics in the period between 1661 and 1686, the year that Leibniz himself indicates as the start of his mature thought.<sup>4</sup> With a courage nicely expressed by the rodeo yell of her book's dedication, Mercer plunges into the chaotic mass of notes, scribbles, letters and other materials of these years, especially of the pre-Hanover period (before 1676), which fortunately are now all available in the *Akademie Ausgabe*. Mercer's book is thus a reminder how important the painstaking philological work of the German editorial team actually is. Mercer's work is the best possible proof that the thick Akademie volumes contain much more than just some moderately interesting additions to Leibniz' known works. On the basis of an enormously diverse range of materials, Mercer offers a powerful image of the metaphysics of the young Leibniz that will doubtlessly affect our interpretation of the late and canonical Leibniz too.

Mercer breaks with the widespread view that Leibniz' metaphysics of the '60s and '70s is nothing more than an incoherent heap of ill-fated attempts at building a unified metaphysical edifice. Quite on the contrary, she shows that already before Leibniz went to Paris in 1672 he had grasped most of the basic intuitions that would continue to guide his metaphysical endeavors until the end. Moreover, according to Mercer, Leibniz inherited these assumptions from his teachers at Leipzig, Jacob Thomasius and Johann Adam Scherzer. She divides these basic intuitions (or Principles as Mercer calls them) into three major fields. Besides an Aristotelian metaphysics of substance, Leibniz adopted a Platonist metaphysics of divinity and its relation to the created world. Finally, like his teachers, Leibniz was strongly committed to what Mercer calls conciliatory eclecticism, the idea that all philo-

sophical traditions have a share in universal truth, which is moreover in harmony with Scripture. Thomasius was a representative of a widespread movement at German universities that typically tried to harmonize competing philosophical claims, with the aim of furthering not only philosophical but also religious and political peace. Leibniz adopted this program from his teachers, but obviously applied it with much more philosophical acumen. Keeping in mind this methodological program is important, because it explains for instance why the young Leibniz can on the one hand write in his famous letter to Remond that he dropped the substantial forms of the scholastics in favor of mechanistic models, while on the other hand he remains committed to an Aristotelian view of corporeal substance. According to Mercer, this specific application of the eclecticist program was certainly not endorsed by the anti-mechanist Thomasius, but was more in line with the *philosophia novantiqua* of Dutch Cartesians such as Johannes de Raeij or English eclectics such as Thomas White and Kenelm Digby.

Mercer discerns the first glimpses of Leibniz' Aristotelian theory of substance in texts related to the *Catholic Demonstrations*, Leibniz' project of 1668/9 aimed at reuniting Catholics and Protestants by means of an ecumenical philosophy that explains central mysteries of faith such as the Eucharist. Mercer amply confirms the conclusion of Daniel Fouke in his seminal article that "Leibniz' early metaphysical investigations were at least partly motivated by problems posed by Transubstantiation which were part of his overall apologetic concerns and the desire to reunify Catholics and Lutherans."<sup>5</sup> Already in a text such as *On Transubstantiation* we find the familiar Leibnizian thesis that all phenomena have to be explained by the corporeal, mechanical features of corporeal substances, but that these features themselves are not self-explanatory and need to rest upon a higher, incorporeal principle of activity. Mercer shows that we find here Leibniz' Aristotelian metaphysics of substance in full swing. Like the Aristotelians, Leibniz conceives of substance as a unity that exists *per se* and has its own proper principle of activity. Since bodies do not have their own principle of activity, a body can only be considered substantial in its union with a concurring mind, i.e. with God in the case of inanimate bodies and with the human mind in the case of our own bodies. Thus, according to Mercer, Leibniz "conceives of substance in terms that are fundamentally Aristotelian: a passive principle [...] is combined with a substantial form to constitute a non-human substance." (p. 87).

Now that we know what the substance of an inanimate body is, we still need to know what its essence is. Mercer shows that Leibniz answers this question in his famous 1669 letter to Thomasius. There, he actually introduces a two-fold concep-

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tion of substantial form. Bodies are considered a union between inert mass and an immaterial substantial form, i.e. God. God implants motion in the compound, which gives rise to the primary corporeal features of the body: its size, shape or in other words, its *figura*. Given that this secondary form functions as the inherent, active principle of the compound body and moreover explains the body's essential features, it can properly be called the essence of the corporeal substance.

Mercer's interpretation is certainly illuminating. Against the common interpretation, she convincingly argues that the project of combining mechanistic physics with Aristotelian metaphysics did not emerge in Leibniz' later years, but was present right from the start. Nevertheless, one wonders how "Aristotelian" all of this actually was. To a certain extent, Mercer's book appears to use the labels "Platonism" and "Aristotelianism" in a rather essentialist way. Mercer is right in pointing out that Leibniz' teachers, especially Scherzer, stuck to the neat division between the "lofty" metaphysics of divinity of Plato and the "terrestrial" physics of Aristotle that was already commonplace among ancient Neoplatonists. Although, as Mercer states, Leibniz also refers to this division, this does not mean it is useful as a historiographic tool in order to evaluate his own metaphysics. Present day historians of philosophy have become aware that labels such as Aristotelianism and Platonism are inherently problematic. For instance, the metaphysics of substance of Thomas Aquinas, a firm partisan of Aristotelianism, are steeped in Neoplatonist speculations. Of course, Mercer is aware of this and one has to sympathize with her approach in the light of the notorious problem of studying Leibniz' concrete sources. A classic *Quellenstudie* is almost impossible in the case of this particular author who read everything and moreover always found something of interest in every single book he could lay his hands on. Instead of trying to track the specific Platonist influences of Bisterfeld, Alsted or others it is therefore a priori more useful to unravel more general similarities between Leibniz and "Aristotelian" and "Platonist" positions. The pitfall of this approach, however, is that it can end up applying anachronistic labels to historical phenomena. On the whole, Mercer's approach is fruitful and convincing, but unfortunately, she does not always avoid this particular danger.

The treatment of Leibniz' first conception of substance is, I think, a case in point. First, Mercer is right in pointing out that the definitions of substance as that which exists per se and which has a proper source of activity are run-of-the-mill Aristotelian. But according to Leibniz this title of substance only applies to immaterial entities, which, if anything, is a Platonist assumption. In any case, it is certainly not a common assumption of the Aristotelians. By holding the Platonists

solely responsible for Leibniz' metaphysics of divinity, Mercer misses possible Platonist influences on his view of substance.

Furthermore, I do not fully agree that Leibniz' view of corporeal substance in *On Transubstantiation* is "fundamentally Aristotelian". Leibniz calls bodies accidents that only acquire per se activity through their union with concurring mind, which is again an anti-Aristotelian view. The mind with which inanimate bodies are united, namely God, is not an intrinsic form, but at best a *forma assistens*, as the scholastics would call it. The union between God and bodies is an extrinsic, not an intrinsic one, which is important for Leibniz' account of transubstantiation: the mind of Christ can thus easily dissolve its union with one body and acquire a new one or be simultaneously united with different pieces of bread. The upshot of all of this is the idea that bodies do not have an intrinsic principle of motion, which is a conclusion Leibniz specifically uses against the scholastic notion of substantial forms.

Leibniz' account in the letter to Thomasius does not significantly alter this picture. The *figura* or "organized arrangement of parts" is clearly not an active principle on a par with scholastic substantial form. Once a body is put in motion by another one, this secondary form *determines* the motion of the body, but it is not the *source* of motion. In other words, Leibniz' use of the notion of "form" as *figura* is more in line with the mechanistic hypothesis with its denial of active powers and inner sources of causality than with Aristotelian physics. According to Mercer, "with admirable finesse, Leibniz has placed a version of mechanical physics firmly on an Aristotelian foundation" (p. 126). But can this foundation really be so solid if it lacks perhaps the most essential Aristotelian ingredient, namely the fact that bodies have an internal *phusis* that forms their active principle and explanation of their essential features? Can one really call such a view "fundamentally Aristotelian"? The point is not just a historiographic one, but also matters with respect to our view of Leibniz' development. In her analysis of the period after the letter to Thomasius, Mercer aptly demonstrates that Leibniz struggled with the problem how to give each body an *internal* incorporeal principle that can properly function as its substance, i.e. as its principle of activity. But in my view this means that Leibniz slowly started realizing that his conciliation between mechanistic physics and Aristotelianism had been "naive"<sup>6</sup>, ignoring one of the central tenets of Aristotelian metaphysics. In this respect, Mercer's claim that the famous "restoration of the substantial forms" announced in the letter to Duke Johann Friedrich of 1679 already begins in 1668 is not fully convincing. Leibniz uses the word, but only in order to cloak an essentially mechanical story. What Mercer, nevertheless,

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brilliantly demonstrates is that this restoration does indeed occur much earlier than 1679, the date accepted by Robinet and other commentators, namely around 1670.

In texts from this period, Leibniz conceives of inanimate substances as compounds of a passive principle with momentary minds. In other words, by then, Leibniz has found an incorporeal principle that is intrinsic to the natural body. According to Mercer, we find this conception not only in a text such as *On the Incarnation of God* of 1669/1670, but also in the much more famous two mathematico-physical treatises, the *New Physical Hypothesis* and the *Theory of Abstract Motion*. Mercer detects the metaphysics behind these two treatises that Leibniz wrote under the influence of Hobbes' theory of *conatus*. She plausibly argues that the notion of momentary minds should first and foremostly be seen against the background of Leibniz' attempt to construct a viable metaphysics of substance. While this is true for the two physical works, it is not equally clear with respect to *On the Incarnation of God*. There, Leibniz speaks about the union of a human (or, for that matter, divine) mind with the human body and about the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures. Mercer does not give altogether convincing evidence that we are to extrapolate this to inanimate bodies.

After dealing with the "Aristotelian" metaphysics of substance of the period until 1670/1671, Mercer investigates the Platonist metaphysics of Divinity of the same period. In a generally convincing manner, she reaches the revolutionary conclusion that 1) most of the basic insights of Leibniz' mature thoughts concerning the relation between and God and world are already in place by 1671 and that 2) these insights have a profound Platonist character. According to Mercer, Leibniz speaks of God as the source of being out of which the entire world emanates. God is the source of both unity and diversity within the world. The lower levels within the emanative process, in particular corporeal substances, are both dependent on God and have their proper activity. Foreshadowing his later notion of complete concept Leibniz states that every substance contains a set of instructions by which it emanates God's essence in its own unique way. Given that all substances find their source in God, they display a fundamental harmony. In this context, Leibniz speaks about human (but according to Mercer after 1671 of all created) minds that each reflects all other minds, thus contributing to the harmony, beauty and perfection of the creation. Thus, we not only find a fundamental trait of Leibniz' later monadology, but we also come across the first hint at the principle of pre-established harmony, which equally has Platonist origins.

According to Mercer, in a next phase of his development Leibniz abolished the passive principle in nature. There has been a lot of scholarly discussion on the

question of whether or not in the 1680s Leibniz believed in the real extension of corporeal substances.<sup>7</sup> Mercer cuts short all of these debates by showing that already in 1671 Leibniz transformed the passive material principle within corporeal substances into a collection of mind-like substances. For Leibniz, it gradually became impossible to accept that pure passivity could contribute anything positive to the substance and enhance the goodness and variety of the created world. Mercer holds that these essentially Platonist metaphysical speculations were more important for the development of his metaphysics than the physical problem of the continuum. Mercer bases her interpretation on Leibniz' rather loose remarks about the world soul and a universal ether in the *New Physical Hypothesis*, letters to Oldenburg and von Guericke and some other texts. In his excellent book, Philipp Beeley has interpreted the universal ether of the *New Physical Hypothesis* as a purely mechanical phenomenon. Now, I agree with Mercer that this is perhaps too one-sided in view of Leibniz' reference to "formal atoms" and other apparently incorporeal principles. On the other hand, Mercer's thesis that already in these early texts Leibniz speaks about corporeal substances in terms of "worlds within worlds" and of "collections of corporeal substances, each of which has a dominant mind or substantial form organizing a passive principle which is itself a collection and so on in infinitum" (p. 286) seems to read the later monadology into the earlier physics and lacks a solid textual basis.

The last important step leading to Leibniz' mature metaphysics concerns the problem of the gap between appearances and real things. If corporeal substances are really mind-like things, how then can I explain why I perceive them as extended, material things? Mercer shows that Leibniz' answer consists in the doctrines of complete-ratio phenomenalism and pre-established harmony. For example in the notes from the *Elements of Natural Law* of 1671 Leibniz speaks of our minds reflecting other minds in a harmonious whole, where perception seems to be internal to the mind itself. For Leibniz, perception increasingly became a process that was triggered by principles within the mind itself, which it acquires through emanation from God. The same view is expressed in Leibniz' notes on Wilkins *Universal Characteristic*, where all substances are considered to perceive universal harmony, which is nothing else than God insofar as He is immanent in the world. Since each substance is a different instantiation of the same unique Source of Being, each perceives the world in a different way, thus contributing to universal goodness, beauty and harmony. In this context, Mercer asks the question why Leibniz does not announce the fact that he has thought out such a revolutionary

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metaphysics, one that we hitherto have only known through the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and subsequent works. According to Mercer, Leibniz applies a rhetorical strategy in the context of his conciliatory eclecticism: he does not boldly and authoritatively proclaim the novelty of his own unique philosophy, but tries to convince each specific audience by adapting to their vocabulary and explain his philosophy in harmony with their specific assumptions. Now, this may be true for a number of cases, but it is certainly not true for the notes on Wilkins and many other texts Mercer quotes, which have the character of private notes and drafts. On the whole, Mercer's interpretation of the few scattered notes on Wilkins remains somewhat speculative.

Mercer's view entails that the core of Leibniz' metaphysics was in place when he came to Paris in 1672. She cogently shows how Leibniz further developed this core metaphysics during his Paris years. One of the things he changed was to replace the momentary minds by eternal ones, that at every moment contain traces of the entire history of the world, which is obviously just a little step away from making them monads. Leibniz indeed describes a universe in which each substance expresses the divine essence from its own perspective on account of its own innate principles. Furthermore, Mercer joins the now common rejection of the Russell – Couturat thesis that the theory of truth forms the basis of Leibniz's metaphysics. Mercer demonstrates that the theory of truth was in fact one of the last additions to Leibniz' system, which developed out of his metaphysics of substance. Given her developmental story, Mercer rejects any significant influence on Leibniz' metaphysics either by Spinoza or Malebranche and other occasionalists. Given his conciliatory program, Leibniz was sometimes eager to show the similarities between their views and his own, but that does not mean that his own philosophy was constructed under their influence.

I think that this picture is basically right and should once and for all stop all hunting for the supposedly "key"-influences by Spinoza (or Tschirnhaus), Foucher and others. Nevertheless, in some respects, Mercer's picture of Leibniz' development is disconcertingly linear. In a way, she presents Leibniz as one of his own corporeal substances that harmoniously emanate their activities on account of their own internal production rules, without any external influence (though Leibniz himself needed the initial incentive by Scherzer and Thomasius). Where others hitherto have seen chaos, confusion and experiment, Mercer sees a remarkably consistent philosophical development. The basic parameters of this story are certainly plausible and well argued. Nevertheless, like a true Leibnizian Mercer every now and then overharmonizes all Leibniz' disparate and desperate attempts at building

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a coherent metaphysics. An example is the odd doctrine of the eternal “core” (*Kern*) of substance or *flos substantiae* that Leibniz himself expressly links to both the cabalistic and alchemical traditions. Mercer squeezes this theory into the straightjacket of the view that corporeal substances are collections of mind-like substances, but I think it is quite clear from the context that Leibniz is simply experimenting with yet another view of substance, which like so many others quickly receded to the background of his dominant narrative. Also, Mercer’s style of presentation (giving a set of basic Principles out of which Leibniz’ metaphysics developed) contributes to the impression of linearity.

Nevertheless, these are nothing but the inevitable shadows cast by a truly illuminating work. Mercer’s book is extraordinarily rich, broadly informed and admirably perspicuous in the face of such a wide and chaotic range of texts. The scholarly community will doubtlessly continue to debate and probably emend the details of her account, but it is Mercer’s great achievement to have set the scene for the discussion concerning the development of Leibniz’s metaphysics for a long time to come.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Brown (ed.), *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy* (Dordrecht, 1999)

<sup>2</sup> Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Trinità e Incarnazione. Il rapporto tra filosofia e teologia rivelata nel pensiero di Leibniz* (Milano, 1999)

<sup>3</sup> Philipp Beeley, *Kontinuität und Mechanismus. Zur Philosophie des jungen Leibniz in ihrem ideengeschichtlichen Kontext* (Stuttgart, 1996; *Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa* 30)

<sup>4</sup> Actually, the only one to have done this is Mercer herself in her contribution (co-authored with Robert Sleight) to the *Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, which



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however is not only amplified by the present book, but also significantly emended (see Mercer and Sleigh, “Metaphysics: The Early period to the *Discourse on Metaphysics*”, in N. Jolley (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 67-123.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel C. Fouke, “Metaphysics and the Eucharist in the Early Leibniz”, *Studia Leibnitiana* 24 (1992), pp. 145-159, here p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Garber, “Leibniz on Form and Matter”, *Early Science and Medicine* 2 (1997), pp. 326-352, here p. 332.

<sup>7</sup> This debate was sparked off by Garber’s review of Robert C. Sleigh, *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence* (New Haven, 1990) in *The Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1992), pp. 151-165.