

G. W. Leibniz: De Summa Rerum: Metaphysical Papers, 1675-6,
translated with an introduction and notes by G. H. R. Parkinson.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, lxiv + 145
pp.

Reviewed by Richard Arthur, Middlebury College

Despite his fame as a philosopher, Leibniz was a diplomat by profession, and seldom managed to engage in sustained philosophical activity for any length of time. One exception to this, though, is the period towards the end of his stay in Paris and a little afterwards, when he launched a concerted attack on most of the profoundest problems in metaphysics, tackling them with a penetration and persistence that is remarkable by any standards. The resulting series of “meditations”, to use his own descriptive term, penned between December of 1675 and his arrival at the court in Hanover in December of 1676, has been available for the greater part of this century only to a handful of Leibniz scholars. An edition was published in Kazan in 1913 by Ivan Jagodinsky, and it is from this source that Loemker drew to give a tantalizingly brief selection of the ‘Paris Notes’ in his well known volume of English translations. But Jagodinsky’s edition is as unreliable as it is rare, and it was not until recently that Leibniz scholars were presented with an authoritative and wholly reliable Latin edition by the German Academy of Science at Berlin, volume 3 of Series VI of *Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. In this volume most of the notes on metaphysics are collected together in Section F under the title *De Summa Rerum*, where they constitute articles 57 through 87. This fine edition, however, is of limited use for those having no Latin (for Leibniz) or German (for the editorial apparatus), and even for those who do, it is scarcely either convenient or affordable.

All this is more than remedied by the publication of Parkinson’s excellent little book, the first in the “Yale Leibniz Series” being prepared by Yale University Press under the editorship of Dan Garber and Bob Sleigh. Parkinson’s clear English translations stay as close as stylistically possible to Leibniz’s Latin, and the latter is reproduced from the Academy Edition on facing pages. This is a very sensible arrangement, satisfying the needs of Leibniz scholars whilst at the same time making the texts accessible to a wider audience of teachers and students. For the latter class of readers Parkinson has provided an introduction (xi-lii), in which many of Leibniz’s themes and conclusions are related to each other and to his mature positions, and also some very helpful notes (117-140) relating his views to those of

his predecessors and contemporaries. The introduction is followed by a table of relevant works by Leibniz (liii-lxiv), listed in chronological order and in two columns, with those works that can be dated to within a year in the left column and those whose dating is more uncertain in the right. This, too, should prove a great convenience for users of the volume.

In a short review such as this I can hardly do justice to the treasure of insights and information that Parkinson has provided, so I shall restrict myself to a few comments on the introduction, and then a few more on the translation and critical apparatus. But first an observation on the title and contents. As Parkinson observes (xiii), *Summa Rerum* is a difficult phrase to translate: literally it means either “the sum of things” or “the highest of things”, and is accordingly ambiguous between the universe in its entirety, and the top thing in the universe, or God. This is a convenient ambiguity for Leibniz, who cannot talk about one without the other, and I think Parkinson is wise to leave it untranslated in the title.

This does mean, however, that there is a certain artificiality to Parkinson’s claim to have included only those papers of the *De Summa Rerum* dealing with “metaphysical problems that concern God and the human mind” (xii), as if this gave an unambiguous criterion of selection. Some of the papers of the *De Summa Rerum* concern the supreme being directly, especially those having to do with the possibility of a most perfect being. More typically, however, (as is evidenced by the section titles of Parkinson’s introduction), they run the gamut of fundamental metaphysical issues, such as the nature of ideas, mind, body, space and time, the principles of sufficient reason and harmony, the laws of nature, the problem of the composition of the continuum (whether there are atoms, whether the universe could be infinite, and so forth), and the relation of these aspects of the universe to the Creator. Given this entanglement of the physics and metaphysics, Parkinson should perhaps have provided us with a clearer explication of what he was leaving out and why.

Parkinson’s presentation of themes in the introduction is, I believe, judicious and enlightening, and I have only two bones to pick. One concerns his imputation to Leibniz of “phenomenalism”. Irrespective of whether this term is really apt to characterize Leibniz’s view that “the solidity or unity of bodies comes from the mind”, with the minds in question associated with vortices, it seems to me that in his discussion Parkinson confounds two distinct questions that Leibniz was attempting to answer regarding the status of bodies: (i) is a body anything beyond an aggregation of substances, beyond an accidental unity? and (ii) does a body differ in status from a dream or rainbow? Leibniz can answer ‘yes’ to (ii) without having

made up his mind on (i) just because he is committed to bodies being at least aggregates of substances, in contradistinction to, say, Berkeley.

My second quarrel is with Parkinson's presentation of Leibniz's thinking on the continuum problem in this period. It is not accurate to say (xxxix) that Leibniz initially "argue[d] for the existence of a vacuum" in A, No. 58 (December 1675), only later to derive atoms from the plenum. In the former paper he only upholds the existence of a vacuum in the qualified sense that it would be indistinguishable from a plenum of perfect fluidity which offered no resistance to a body floating in it. He further argues that the existence of a vacuum would follow *if* a continuum is composed of minima—but this is a supposition that he explicitly rejects as an absurdity.

Concerning the critical apparatus: I applaud the editors' decision to include the page numbers of the Academie edition for ease of reference; but, in the same vein, it would have been very useful also to have given the Academie piece numbers (A No. 57, 85 etc.) in the table of contents. Secondly, Parkinson has decided not to include any of the deleted matter carefully recorded by the Akademie editors in footnotes. But in some cases what Leibniz almost included but thought better of is at least as revealing as what he actually wrote, and is often very pertinent to understanding the progression of his thought. An example would be the passage in the notes on p. 584, where Leibniz derives the infinitude of space from the principle of the equality of cause and effect, (which, incidentally, Gaston Grua included in his *Textes inédits*, vol. 1, 1948, 263-4, within square brackets).

Concerning the translation: I very much like Parkinson's style, which is literal, fluent and unfussy. Just because it is so admirably faithful to Leibniz's Latin, though, I would wish it had been a whit more consistent. To take some examples from one piece (A, No. 58): *moveri* is sometimes given an active mood translation ("moves"), sometimes a passive one ("is moved"), as on p. 11: "all things **move**. .. which, when some body swims in it, **is moved** to fill its place". But Leibniz and his contemporaries always use the Latin passive *moveri* where we would use the active, because bodies are unable to move themselves. Second, *servari* is sometimes translated as "is conserved" (11,19), sometimes as "is preserved" (13, 15). The former is preferable, since it preserves the historical connection between Descartes's conservation laws and those of modern physics. And, to take one last example, precisely because *demonstratio* has a precise technical meaning for Leibniz, as Parkinson explains (xvi), it should always be translated as "demonstration", not "proof", as on p. 111.

A few suggestions for improvements: p. 15 “how it is possible for perfectly rectilinear bodies to bend,” not “... for two perfectly rectilinear bodies to bend each other”; p. 17: “why they should bend in this direction rather than that” for “... toward this part rather than that”; and p. 19: “If something is moved with a speed than which no greater is intelligible, it will be everywhere at the same time,” being a counter-possible, would be more happily rendered in the subjunctive: “If something were to move with a velocity than which no greater can be conceived, it would be everywhere at once.”

Errata : p. 14, btm: *se flectere*, not *si flectere* (A468); p. 31, l. 17: “in the **human** ovum”; p. 56, l. -7: *percipio*, not *peripio* (A508); p. 87, l. 7: “that an **inassignable** quantity exists”.

**ABSTRACT OF 1993 ESSAY COMPETITION WINNER:
"Leibniz's Conception of Metaphysical Evil"
by Michael Latzer, St. Anselm College**

A central doctrine of Leibniz's *Theodicy* is the classification of evils as metaphysical, physical and moral. Moral evil is sin; physical evil is suffering; and metaphysical evil, Leibniz says, is “simple imperfection”. It has been commonplace in Leibniz scholarship to understand metaphysical evil as identical with the Leibnizian notion of the “original imperfection of the creature,” or the limitation which inevitably characterizes any created substance. This is Russell's interpretation; and its pervasiveness is no doubt due to the powerful influence which Russell's Leibniz book has exercised in this century. In my paper I challenge this interpretation.

Contrary to what a reading of Russell or of Broad might indicate, Leibniz did not produce his natural theology or his theodicy in a vacuum. Leibniz's theodicy is in fact steeped in the Augustinian-Thomistic theodicy, which includes such familiar elements as the centrality of the Fall, the instrumentality of evil, and, most significantly here, the analysis of evil as *privatio boni*, the absence of goods which in some specifiable sense should be present. Both Augustine and Aquinas deny that creaturely limitation is in and of itself an evil, although they agree that it is a necessary condition for evil.

Do we find Leibniz affirming this point in the *Theodicy*? We do, copiously. And there should be no surprise in this; with his interest in confessional reunion, Leibniz would surely not want to devise an account of evil no mainstream