

Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 301pp. + xiii.

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Leibniz is best known for maintaining two remarkable and seemingly implausible theses: the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, and reality ultimately consists of monads or soul-like entities. Scholars have subjected both these doctrines to searching examination, but on the whole they have not shown much interest in possible connections between them; Leibniz's theodicy and his metaphysics have tended to be regarded as distinct projects which could be safely compartmentalized. In this deeply-researched, fluently-written and often penetrating study, Rutherford argues that this approach is seriously mistaken. In his view we cannot fully understand Leibniz's metaphysics unless we see how it is shaped by the themes of his theodicy.

Perhaps the key concept for bridging the two projects is that of harmony. It is a central thesis of Leibniz's theodicy that God creates a world which is not only the most perfect metaphysically (in terms of quantity of essence), but also the most harmonious. Now we might suppose that the relevance of this thesis to Leibniz's metaphysics is rather superficial: God will prefer a world in which the states of substances are harmonized to one in which they are 'out of sync' with one another.¹ But Rutherford argues for a much more interesting form of relevance; he is concerned to show how the project of theodicy bears on the different strata of Leibniz's metaphysics. In his view Leibniz's God seeks to multiply harmonies, and he achieves this goal by creating a world which is harmonious at a number of different ontological levels. The stratification of the actual world in terms of monads, organisms, and phenomena is required in order to satisfy God's overall desire to maximize harmony. In exploring the links between the levels of Leibnizian ontology and the project of theodicy, Rutherford breaks important new ground.

During the course of expounding his central thesis Rutherford is able to address a number of current controversies in Leibniz scholarship. His discussions of these issues are skillfully woven into the texture of the book as a whole. Rutherford's contributions to these debates are always stimulating and informed by a remarkable command of the literature; his account of Leibniz's nominalism will repay particular study. In what follows I will voice a few doubts concerning the positions that Rutherford adopts.

(1) A particularly vexed issue in Leibniz scholarship is the status of bodies within his idealism. Rutherford agrees with those scholars who hold that Leibniz is not a

phenomenalist. Bodies, for Leibniz, are not harmonised sets of perceptions; they are aggregates of monads. It might be thought that the gap between the two readings could be closed by taking account of Leibniz's thesis that aggregates are themselves mental constructs. But Rutherford, rightly I believe, rejects this view. As he puts it, 'The existence of any aggregate is necessarily mind-dependent; yet this does not mean that aggregates are merely mental things' (p. 222). A strictly phenomenalist reading would require that bodies be purely intramental objects, but Leibniz's thesis that bodies are aggregates of monads cannot be construed in this strong sense.

Rutherford also rejects what might be called the 'misperception' interpretation and it is here that I begin to have doubts. According to this interpretation, Leibniz does not quite mean what he says when he claims that bodies are aggregates of monads; rather, he means that certain aggregates of monads are misperceived as bodies by human observers. As Rutherford recognizes, this interpretation is fuelled by worries about satisfying the demands of Leibniz's Law: bodies and aggregates of monads seem to have very different properties, and therefore cannot be identical (see p. 219). But although Rutherford alludes to the objection from Leibniz's Law, he gives it very short shrift. Moreover, he offers a curious diagnosis of the mistake made by those who press the objection from Leibniz's Law. According to Rutherford, they are guilty of supposing that bodies, for Leibniz, are spatial aggregates of monads. But this diagnosis is implausible. The objector who takes his stand on Leibniz's Law is assuming that aggregates of monads can have only mental properties, and on this basis argues that they cannot be identified with bodies. Thus he can scarcely be supposing that, for Leibniz, bodies are spatial aggregates of monads, for he would thereby be ascribing physical properties to them in a way which would undermine the whole basis of his objection.

More tentatively, one might wonder whether it is such a mistake to suggest that, for Leibniz, bodies are spatial aggregates of monads. Rutherford seems to treat this thesis as equivalent to the claim that 'monads are spatial parts of bodies or spatially located within bodies' (p. 219). If the thesis is interpreted in this way, then certainly it is not one which can be ascribed to Leibniz. But to say that bodies are spatial aggregates of monads need not be taken to mean or to imply that they are aggregates of spatial monads. As Rutherford recognizes, an aggregate for Leibniz is a mind-dependent entity; thus to talk about spatial aggregates of monads is to go beyond speaking about the properties which monads have independently of the contribution of the perceiving mind. It may be objected that even though aggregates and spatial relations are both ideal entities, the mental act of aggregating monads cannot be identified with the mental act of imposing spatial relations on the world. This objection may well be correct, but even if we abandon the attempt to defend the

claim that bodies are spatial aggregates of monads, we might still retreat to a weaker claim: there is no incoherence in saying that bodies are spatial aggregates which result from monads. And indeed such a claim is easy to reconcile with at least some of Leibniz's texts.

(2) Much recent scholarly controversy has focused on a tangled skein of issues concerning the development of Leibniz's metaphysics. According to one influential interpretation, Leibniz moved away from the realist, quasi-Aristotelian ontology of his middle period to the pure idealism of his later years. Rutherford is inclined to agree that Leibniz could find no real place for corporeal substance in his later idealism, but he tends to dispute the realist interpretation of the middle-period metaphysics. In his view there are anticipations of the theory of monads in the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and other related writings.

In arguing for the latter thesis Rutherford recognizes that Leibniz appears to be committed to a theory of irreducible corporeal substances as form-matter composites. Yet he holds that if we dig beneath the surface we shall see that Leibniz is in fact drawn to a reductionist, protomonadological theory: 'Leibniz seems committed to explaining the reality of corporeal substance in terms of substantial forms alone' (p. 157). It seems to me that there is a possible ambiguity in such a claim. If it means that the soul or substantial form is what confers true reality or substantiality, then the claim is justified; it is trivially guaranteed by the very concept of a substantial form. But if it means that what it is to be a corporeal substance is constituted by substantial forms, then the claim is false; a corporeal substance is essentially a composite of form and matter. Rutherford would no doubt reply that he is not guilty of this slide; he would cite the fact that Leibniz gives us no coherent conception of the material component of a corporeal substance, for he consistently regards extension and its modes as merely "imaginary" or phenomenal. But it remains to be shown that such properties cannot combine with substantial forms to produce something truly real.

Rutherford further believes that Leibniz's discussion of the issue of corporeal substance is bedevilled by confusion. The confusion is rooted in 'the blurring of two different conceptions of the necessary conditions for the existence of a corporeal substance' (p. 269): according to the weaker conception, nothing more is required than the existence of a unifying substantial form; according to the stronger conception, something qualifies as a substance only if it is a *unum per se* or intrinsic unity. Yet it might be replied that Leibniz was not guilty of any such blurring; rather, he consistently imposed the stronger condition, and was simply uncertain as to whether it was satisfied by anything other than souls.

(3) In Part I of his book Rutherford makes a sustained attempt to show that Leibniz's theodicy is largely free from the tensions which are often found in it. Against those who object that the best possible world might be the most horrible place to live in, Rutherford argues that 'in aiming for the greatest total perfection, God necessarily also creates that collection of minds with the greatest potential for happiness and virtue' (p. 49). And against Rescher and others, he argues that Leibniz's God is able to avoid a trade-off between the values of simplicity and variety. Most fundamentally, Rutherford seeks to show that God's goal of maximising the quantity of essence is not in conflict with his goal of creating the most harmonious world.

Rutherford may well be right with regard to all these interpretative claims. But it seems to me that, in at least one place, he does less than justice to the difficulties in Leibniz's argument. For example, he believes that Leibniz is justified in asserting that the world which contains the greatest quantity of essence will necessarily be the world which contains the greatest variety of beings. Rutherford explains:

This result follows given two further assumptions. The first is that variety is only realized at a fundamental level through a varying of degrees of perfection....The second assumption is that any given type of being, defined in terms of a certain degree of perfection, can only be instantiated once in the world. (p. 25)

The validity of the argument appears to need some defense against objections. For why should not the quantity of essence criterion be satisfied by a universe consisting exclusively of infinitely many angels? Of all creatures, angels are presumably the most metaphysically real, since they are closest to God—the *ens realissimum*. Yet such a world would not contain the greatest variety of things. It is not, I think, adequate to reply that such a hypothesis falls foul of the second assumption; for even a world of angels can honor the principle that any given type of being can be instantiated only once. After all, Leibniz hardly needs to be reminded that every angel is supposed to be an *infima species*.

Rutherford's Leibniz is very much a baroque metaphysician concerned to articulate a vision of the universe in sometimes fantastic detail; he is not the problem-solving philosopher of whom we have heard in recent years. Some readers may wish that Rutherford had made more of the Leibniz whose philosophical agenda is set for him by the issues which engaged Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza. But there is no doubt that there is much in Rutherford's account which is convincing and which illuminates hitherto obscure areas of his thought. *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* is an excellent book which deserves to be widely read.

¹It should be noted that Rutherford regards the harmony of substances as a feature of any possible world. See p. 197.