

André Robinet, *G. W. Leibniz: Le meilleur des mondes par la balance de l'Europe*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994. 329pp. + xi.

Reviewed by Patrick Riley, University of Wisconsin (Madison)

For forty years all Leibniz-scholars have been deeply indebted to André Robinet, who is incontrovertibly the most important French Leibniz-interpreter since the much-lamented Gaston Grua. Indeed it was in the very year of Grua's premature death (1955) that Robinet began four decades of Leibniz-illumination with his magisterial *Malebranche et Leibniz: Relations personnelles* (which soon led to his definitive 20 volume edition of the *Oeuvres Complètes de Malebranche*, 1958-1975). The year 1962 saw the arrival of Robinet's splendid edition (undertaken with Heinrich Schepers of Münster) of Leibniz' *Nouveaux Essais*—as Volume VI, vi of the great Academy Edition of the *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*. Further important Leibniz-scholarship (including fine editions of the “Monadology” and the “Discourse on Metaphysics”) marked Robinet's activity over the next quarter-century, culminating in two remarkable books from the 1980s: *Architectonique disjonctive, automates systémiques et idéalité transcendentales dans l'oeuvre de Leibniz* (1986), the most penetrating general over-view of Leibniz' philosophy produced in recent decades, and *G.W. Leibniz, Iter Italicum (mars 1689 - mars 1690), La dynamique de la République des lettres* (1988), in which Leibniz' many Italian concerns and *rappports* are brought out with astonishing thoroughness. This last book was an elaborated outgrowth of Robinet's contribution to the 1980 Leibniz conference at Ferrara, “Leibniz as Historian”—the conference at which the present reviewer first met Professor Robinet, and learned that he is as formidably learned and eloquently persuasive in person as he is on the printed page. And that remains true to the present day: Robinet's contribution to the celebration of Leibniz' 350th birthday at the Berlin-Brandenburg Akademie der Wissenschaften (Potsdam, July 1996) was as masterly as ever, and was reported as such by a special article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

We have had to wait until now, however, for a full Robinet study of Leibniz' political and moral philosophy—a wait which has proven eminently worthwhile, since Robinet's *Le meilleur des mondes par la balance de l'Europe* is the most important French contribution to the exposition and understanding of Leibniz' practical thought since Grua's *Jurisprudence universelle et theodicée selon Leibniz* (1953) and *La justice humaine selon Leibniz* (1956).

On the back cover of *Le meilleur des mondes*, one finds a (wholly correct) claim about the historical evolution of Leibniz' political-moral thought from the 1660s to 1716, a claim whose lapidary precision one fully appreciates only at the end of Robinet's 329 pages. The claim is that "Leibniz passes [after 1670] from a conception of absolute sovereignty to a notion of limited supremacy, articulated through a displacement of the metaphysical primacy of power in favor of wisdom ... [so that] a rational natural law is opposed to the demands of [kingly] *bon plaisir* and violence"—a natural law which in turn rests on "a conception of love which links the person to the universe of rational religion [in the *Theodicée*]."

If one unpacks that dense but beautifully truth-telling paragraph, what one finds Robinet saying is that, until late 1670, Leibniz favored a notion of (divine and human) justice in which "power is greater than wisdom"—leading Leibniz to a brief "Hobbesian" period in which even Thrasymachus' notorious assertion that justice is "what is pleasing to the most powerful" was viewed favorably (especially in the *Nova Methodus* of 1667). This brief "Hobbism," culminating in Leibniz' letter to Hobbes himself of July 1670—in which the young German tells the elderly Englishman that he has found "great illumination" in Hobbes' civil philosophy which will be helpful in "undertaking a work on rational jurisprudence"—provisionally shaped Leibniz' practical thought in the late 1660s, despite the fact that his main Leipzig philosophy-teacher, Jacob Thomasius, had in his *Philosophia Practica* linked justice not to Hobbesian *potestas* but to Christian *amor* and *benevolentia* (notions which later recurred in Leibniz' mature definition of justice as *caritas sapientis seu benevolentia universalis*, the "charity/love of the wise, that is, universal benevolence"). But, as Robinet correctly shows, after the "crisis of 1670," which pulled Leibniz back from full devotion to "the moderns" such as Hobbes and Descartes, he began, Thomasius-like, to see justice not as the *potestas* and *auctoritas* of a powerful Hobbesian "sovereign," but precisely as "wisdom" fused with Christian "charity" or love—above all in the definition of justice as *caritas sapientis* (beginning in 1677). In short, Hobbes' version of Epicurean justice (creating legal sovereignty through agreement and contract) gave way for Leibniz to a Christian Platonism (or Platonic Christianity) in which, as in Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* and *De Doctrina Christiana*, the heart of justice is "wise" or "measured" or "ordered" *love*. (Indeed as early as the *Grundriss* of 1671, one finds Leibniz urging that "if power is greater than wisdom [or reason], he who possesses it is either a lamb who cannot use it at all, or a wolf and a tyrant who cannot use it well," and insisting that the "love" or charity which keeps wisdom and power in harmonious equilibrium is "the foundation of justice.") In this connection Robinet

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aptly quotes Leibniz' 1696 correspondence with Kettwig concerning the Hobbesianism in which power is greater than wisdom and love: "I recognize that men are constrained by reciprocal fear and by necessity to found and constitute a guardian power for society, to preserve that society; but the source of this is love sooner than fear [*sed praeter metum amor*]."

In showing that Leibniz' *jurisprudence universelle* resting on "the charity of the wise" is Christian-Platonist rather than Hobbesian, Robinet makes advantageous use of hitherto unknown Leibniz-texts which have appeared only in the so-called Voraus Edition, published at Münster over the last ten years (through the collegial generosity of Heinrich Schepers). "By the existence of God" as wisely charitable ruler of the best possible world, Leibniz urges in a paper from the 1680s, "every state of nature which is brutish and bestial is suspended ... as well as the [Hobbesian] right of all against all, and the wise man can thus give free exercise to charity with security, and bear witness to a good which is proof against evils." (This passage represents Leibniz' whole "universal jurisprudence" as certainly as each monad represents the whole *kosmos*.) And in the same vein Robinet cites another characteristic (but unknown) Leibniz-passage from the Voraus Edition: "One cannot love God without loving his brother, one cannot have wisdom without having charity; that is the touchstone of true virtue." Finally, Robinet stresses Leibniz' shift from early (but brief) "Hobbism" to a post-1670 "wise charity" which fuses Plato and St. Paul ("the greatest of these is charity") in a splendid paragraph: "Leibniz repeats a hundred times that if the notion of justice adds nothing to that of [powerful] action, one falls into the regime of a tyranny in which *stat pro ratione voluntas* ['let will take the place of reason'] prevails. The struggle against 'modernity,' against Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza, is undertaken ... [to show] that goodness and justice have their reasons which are independent of force" (p. 116). And that sovereignty of "reason" over "force" then becomes the central theme of Leibniz' remarkable *Opinion on the Principles of Pufendorf* (1706), which gained a European reputation through Barbeyrac's translation.

Robinet rightly recognizes, in *Le meilleur des mondes*, that Leibniz' most innovative and effective use of "justice as the charity of the wise" is to be found in the "Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice" (c. 1703), in which Leibniz insists that justice is not a mere refraining from harm in a negative way (the *neminem laedere* of Roman law), that justice involves a charitable ascent (like the loving ascent to *philosophia* in Plato's *Phaedrus*) to doing positive good from wise and benevolent motives. "Some who pass for great judges in this world," Leibniz complains in the "Meditation," content themselves "with not harming anybody, but

they are not at all of a humor to improve people's condition; they believe, in short, that one can be just without being charitable." But there are fortunately others, he goes on, who have "larger and finer views": "They would approve what I have put in my preface to the *Codex Iuris Gentium* [1693], that justice is nothing else than the charity of the wise, that is to say, goodness toward others which is conformed to wisdom." Led by "degrees," in a quasi-mathematical moral *continuum*, Leibniz finally urges, "one will agree not only that men should abstain from harm, but that they should prevent evil from happening .... Whether one does evil or refuses to do good is [only] a matter of degree."

In *Le meilleur des mondes*, Robinet helpfully elaborates Leibniz' notion in the "Meditation" that by tiny incremental degrees, without breaks or leaps, we can be brought to "make people better off." And here Robinet, as in all his Leibniz scholarship of the past forty years, keeps to Leibniz' very language: "What would we say if another, who could help us avoid an evil 'by turning his hand,' will not aid us? We would take him to be an evil man, an enemy. In the dialectic of 'the place of others,' one could say that we put ourselves in the place of ourselves .... Degree by degree, one must end by agreeing [with Leibniz] that it is necessary 'to stop the evil that is being done, and even to relieve it when it is done,' at least insofar as one can without inconveniencing oneself." Finally, Robinet cites what strikes him as the conclusive passage of the "Meditation" on justice: "One can say, then, that justice ... is the constant will to act in such a way (so far as it is possible) that no one can complain of us, when we would complain of another in a like case .... One must strive to content people as far as it is possible, and therefore what is just is in conformity to the charity of the wise."

With Leibniz' anti-Hobbesian *jurisprudence universelle* of Christian-Platonic *caritas sapientis* and *benevolentia universalis* fully in place, Robinet goes on to show, in the second part of *Le meilleur des mondes*, that Leibniz' mature denigration of mere power enabled him to question the Bodinian-Hobbesian notion of "sovereignty" as *plenitudo potestatis* (while at the same time preserving a Dantean idea of the *majestas* of the Empire as the highest form of a wisely charitable *respublica christiana*). That same subordination of *potestas* to *sapientia*, *ratio* and *caritas* enabled Leibniz to urge, especially in the brilliant 1683 satire on Louis XIV's imperializing bellicosity, the *Mars Christianissimus*, that "if his Majesty reflected sufficiently on his own greatness, he would see that the evils which he ordains or which he permits are not at all necessary, and that, in consequence, his actions are not always as just as they are great. It is this greatness, indeed, which is opposed to justice." And the last part of Robinet's book is devoted

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to lasting peace as the final earthly outgrowth of Leibnizian wisdom, charity and benevolence; here it is worth pointing out that Robinet's latest contribution to Leibniz-scholarship is a splendid edition of Leibniz' writings on the Abbé de St. Pierre's *Projet de paix perpétuelle* (Paris 1996).

If time and space remained (having survived Leibniz' letters to Samuel Clarke), one could go on to point out that Robinet offers sympathetic and wholly reliable passages dealing with Leibniz' reflections on "forms of government," with his legal theory of "personal rights," with his rehabilitation of Roman jurisprudence (so that one can ascend from *neminem laedere* to "live charitably"), with his understandings of Grotius and Pufendorf, with the "material" and the "cultural" factors underlying Leibnizian "peace," with Leibniz' insistence that "true politics consists in justice and in charity, and a great prince cannot be better served than when the happiness of the people makes up his own"—to mention only a few of the countless topics on which Robinet touches.

The point is that *G. W. Leibniz: Le meilleur des mondes par la balance de l'Europe* is the finest general commentary on the whole of Leibniz' political, moral and legal thought to have been achieved in any language in the last forty years. That was to be expected from a Leibniz-scholar of Robinet's stature, but to see it actually accomplished is a joy and an inspiration.