

*Leibniz's 'New System' and Associated Contemporary Texts.* Translated and edited by R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

Reviewed by Marleen Rozemond, Kansas State University

R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks have added a very interesting and valuable collection of translations to the existing Leibnizian corpus in English. The volume contains a translation of the published version and a draft of the "New System" and correspondence between Leibniz and several of his contemporaries connected to and prompted by the "New System". This correspondence reveals that the publication of the "New System" gave rise to a very lively and very interesting exchange between Leibniz and various thinkers of the period. Unavoidably, there is occasional repetition, when the same question gets asked by several people, and some of the questions reveal basic misunderstandings that may be immediately obvious to the seasoned Leibniz scholar. But frequently the questions are very interesting and they often provoke illuminating responses from Leibniz and certainly ones that go beyond what he had first said in the "New System". Besides, the correspondence provides sometimes vivid insight into Leibniz' relations with several of his contemporaries. And one of the truly great virtues of the collection is that it contains not only Leibniz' letters, but also those from his interlocutors.

The correspondents featured in this collection are Simon Foucher, Henri Basnage de Beauval, Pierre Bayle, François Lamy, Isaac Jacquelot, Damaris Masham, Pierre Desmaizeaux and René Joseph de Tournemine. The texts it brings together include some that had been translated before, but a number that were not yet available in English, and indeed, several that are not easily available in the original languages. Some of them were published in Gerhardt or the Akademie Edition, but others were taken from other, less accessible editions, journals of the period, or, in the case of one small bit of text, from the transcript of a manuscript not yet published.<sup>1</sup>

The translated texts contain much that is of interest for an understanding of Leibniz. The topics covered include the pre-established harmony, Leibniz' conception of souls or monads, free will, occasionalism. Particularly interesting and enjoyable to read is the lengthy exchange with Bayle. Bayle raises a number of very interesting questions. Besides, the two philosophers treat each other with great respect, and so the exchange is particularly gracious in tone. Bayle generously declines to push Leibniz on issues on which he thinks other philosophers do

*Leibniz Society Review*, Vol. 8, 1998

no better (for instance, free will). But he pushes Leibniz hard to explain just how souls are supposed to produce their own states. Thus he asks Leibniz to compare souls and material atoms, and wonders how the soul, being simple, could possibly generate a succession of different states. Leibniz' exchange with Damaris Masham is also quite interesting. She reiterates Locke's defense of the possibility of thinking matter. In response, Leibniz brings out the significance in his view of the notion of the nature of a substance and his view that all states of a substance must be modifications, a position that involved rejecting scholastic real qualities. And, he writes, since the nature of matter can't have thought as a modification, God would need to add a new nature to matter, which would amount to adding another substance (p. 213).

On a different note, Leibniz elaborates on his claim in the "New System" that the pre-established Harmony generates a good argument for God's existence: whereas the Epicureans could argue that our world could have resulted from chance occurrence, Leibniz suggests, this line of thought is not at all plausible as an explanation for the pre-established Harmony (pp. 207, 212). Appealingly, he rejects excessive reliance on God's unintelligibility: this approach, he contends, has led to the attribution of tyrannical actions to God. On free will he sometimes makes use of Bayle's line that others do no better on this issue. But he also insists that what is crucial for free will is spontaneity, and, given his denial of interaction between a soul and any other creatures, his account emphasizes the soul's spontaneity. To the objection that God created the soul programmed to have just the perceptions it has over the course of its existence, he responds that the nature of each soul was chosen by God on the basis of his understanding it, and already contained what would happen to that soul. This view, he contends, again preserves the soul's spontaneity.

While he regards his own view as superior, of course, Leibniz often expresses himself with moderation about occasionalism and minimizes its differences with his own view (although at other times he insists on the differences as his interlocutors don't always see any). But in response to questions by Lamy he displays a remarkable level of confidence in the superiority of the pre-established harmony: he writes that "pre-established harmony is something more profound, and can only be the fruit of the greater maturity of philosophy which comes with time, that is to say, it is more due to God than to men"(p. 163). And in a contentious mode he argues that occasionalism, since it "robs created things of all power and action", will lapse into Spinozism which he regards as very evil [*mauvais*] and absurd (p. 164)!

The collection concludes with Leibniz' exchange with Tournemine on the union

of body and soul, and it is useful to have Tournemine's objections included. Tournemine charges that Leibniz does not succeed in establishing any stronger sense of union than the Cartesians (that is, the occasionalists) do. Leibniz readily grants the objection. This response has puzzled interpreters given Leibniz' repeated insistence that the pre-established Harmony does better than occasionalism as an account of the union.<sup>2</sup> But the key is that he also suggests that he had not really attempted to address the union in the sense in which it interests Tournemine. The solution lies in the fact that there are two different issues at stake: the union as it concerns interaction, and the union as it concerns the unification of body and soul into a single, unified entity.<sup>3</sup> Leibniz is confident about the pre-established Harmony as an account of (apparent) interaction, but this confidence does not apply to the question of the unity of the body-soul composite.

The book is divided into chapters, each of which contains an exchange with a particular interlocutor accompanied by an introduction. These introductions, which are very useful, contain brief biographical notes on Leibniz' correspondents as well as an outline of the contents of the exchange. In addition the editors included useful information about different drafts of the texts, their itineraries through the hands of various individuals, their being sent or not sent and when, their languishing on the desks of publishers or getting lost altogether. One gets a vivid sense not only of the intellectual content of the exchanges but also of the relations between the correspondents and the journal situation around 1700. Examples of useful features of the book include a detailed, complicated note on the first use of the term "Pre-established Harmony" (p. 137), the observation that there was a Protestant version of the *Mémoires de Trévoux* as well as the Jesuit one, and the original pagination of the excerpts from a book by Lamy in the margins.

Nevertheless, there were a few places where a little more information would have been helpful. On pp. 9-10 the editors provide an extensive description of the different manuscripts of the "New System", their relations to each other and to the published version. This is very useful but the description is also a bit confusing. Thus it takes some detective work to determine that apparently there is no manuscript that corresponds exactly to the version published in 1695. Another example occurs in the same chapter. In a note (pp. 9-10n18) the editors observe that the published version of the "New System" begins with the sentence "Il y a plusieurs années", the first three drafts with "Il y a *déjà* plusieurs années" (emphasis added). They translate the published version and the first of these drafts. But they leave the word *déjà* untranslated, which sent this reader scurrying to figure out whether she had misunderstood their discussion of the different drafts.

Sometimes the editors are not quite sufficiently clear about what source they used as the basis for their translation. They do not say whether they consulted the manuscripts themselves, but there is reason to think they did not (see n. 1 above). Often one infers that they used Gerhardt, or some other published version including the original journal articles. But sometimes matters are confusing. Thus they offer a translation of what is sometimes known as “The First Explanation of the New System” but they do not discuss the relationship of their source (which I suppose was the journal article) to the Gerhardt edition (G IV 493-500), which offers a slightly different title (“est dit” instead of “a été dit”), and different numbers in the margins. A similar problem arises for the “Reply to the Comments in the Second Edition of M. Bayle’s *Critical Dictionary* in the Article ‘Rorarius’, Concerning the System of Pre-established Harmony”. Woolhouse and Francks note that there are significant differences between “this original [the version published in Leibniz’ time] and Desmaizeaux’s and Gerhardt’s (G IV 554-571) republications” (p. 107n55). The differences are indeed numerous, and not of a merely stylistic type. But where do these differences come from, the reader wonders? The editors don’t say. Gerhardt writes: “Sie ist hier mit vielen nachträglichen Zusätzen Leibnizens abgedruckt” (“It is printed here with many subsequent additions by Leibniz”, G IV 421). That is certainly an interesting bit of information that might have been included. Finally on p. 71 several drafts of a letter to Bayle are identified, but the editors do not explain which one was sent—if any.

The translations are faithful and smooth, preserving the grace with which these thinkers expressed themselves. In case of doubt about the translation of a particular expression, the authors follow the practice of including the expression in the original language, which is always French. When checking the originals I only found occasional reasons for quarrel: p. 49, God’s intervention is “inappropriate”—the French says “peu concevable”—hard to conceive; p. 138, “active” for “actuées”, where the point is that animals are actualized by souls; “appétit” is sometimes translated as “desire” (p. 102, but on p. 239 we find “appetite”) whereas the slightly more technical and broader “appetite” strikes me as more appropriate. There is some confusion about the term *genie*: on p. 201 we find “genies” for the French “génies”, but on p. 205 “génies” is translated as “spirits” (and “minds” is used for “esprits”).

I stumbled over the translation of “physique” as “real” (p. 199) in the phrase “les âmes exercent une action physique et immédiate en elles mêmes”—“souls carry out physical and immediate action within themselves”—although it must be pointed out that the translators do include the word “physique” between parentheses.

Leibniz does refer to a physical influence as a real influence. But matters are complicated. Leibniz sometimes contrasts the notions of the physical and the metaphysical in particular when he denies that there is a physical influence between mind and body as the scholastics would have it (see, for instance, *Theodicy* I. 59, G VI 135). This suggests a contrast between the metaphysical and the real. But when he discusses the *union* of body and soul at *Theodicy* I. 55, he suggests that he does not “fail to admit a real [*vraye*] union between the soul and the body that makes of them a suppositum. This union is [*va au*] metaphysical, whereas a union of influence would be [*iroit au*] physical” (G VI 81). So translating *physique* as “real” is misleading. For given the contrast between the physical and the metaphysical, this translation suggests that what is metaphysical is not real, contrary to Leibniz’ willingness to call a metaphysical union “real”. To be precise, he seems to contrast the metaphysical and the real where *interaction* is concerned. Physical interaction between body and soul is real, it involves the mind disturbing (*troubler*) the laws of the body and vice versa and it is immediate whereas the pre-established Harmony allows for interaction only in an indirect sense where the states of body and soul correspond in consequence of God’s mediation (p. 199 of *Leibniz’s ‘New System’*, and *Theodicy* I. 59, G VI 13). Leibniz only allows a metaphysical sense of interaction.

These criticisms amount to minor objections, however. The texts are well-translated and accompanied by much useful information. It is a wonderful addition to the existing Leibnizian corpus in English.

Marleen Rozemond  
Philosophy Department  
Kansas State University  
204 Kedzie Hall  
Manhattan, Kansas 66506-1506  
marleen@ksu.edu

---

<sup>1</sup>A fragment of a letter by Foucher. The editors note the transcript was provided by Niall D. Martin.

<sup>2</sup>See R. M. Adams, *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist* (Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 295, and Donald Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 274.

<sup>3</sup>Or so I have argued in “Leibniz on the Union of Body and Soul”, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79, 1997, pp. 150-178.