

Ezio Vailati, *Leibniz & Clarke: A Study of Their Correspondence*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. xii + 250pp.

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## I.

Aside from those working directly on Leibniz's views of space and time, many students and scholars of Leibniz will confess on reflection to thinking that his exchange with Clarke (1715-16) is a bit philosophically thin. The Correspondence does of course mark a pivotal episode in British-Continental debates about natural philosophy. Fueled in part by the bitter dispute between Leibniz and Newton (read: Newton and his cronies) over the discovery of the infinitesimal calculus, the exchange enjoyed attention in its own day — at the very beginning, on Leibniz's end, through private correspondence with the likes of Wolff, Bernoulli, Rémond and Bourguet, and then publicly in learned journals, books and translated editions following Clarke's published volume of the letters (with notes, appendices, and related letters) in 1717. Nowadays, it seems easy enough for most of us to wave in its direction as the *locus classicus* of Leibniz's views on space and time, and pick at such bits of it here and there as might prove illuminating—on the Principle of Sufficient Reason or the Identity of Indiscernibles, say. But the scope of the Correspondence is really quite vast, ranging widely over topics from the Nature of God and His relation to the created order, the existence of atoms and the void, and freedom to the size of the universe, miracles, the nature of matter, and the relation of the soul to the body. One should have thought that instead of picking bits from it here and there, an energetic exchange between two learned and systematic thinkers on so many deep and important philosophical topics was deserving rather of a sustained gold-mining operation.

It is, in any case, deserving of a book, and Ezio Vailati has done us the good service of writing one. The book has many virtues, chief among them being a reminder of just how wide is the range of philosophical issues discussed in the Correspondence. Vailati's scholarship is first-rate. His command of the historical and contemporary literature is woven nicely between the main text and a helpful set of end-notes — the latter of which will serve (in conjunction with the Bibliography) as an important resource for anyone aiming to track down details. The book's six chapters on God, The Soul, Free Will, Space & Time, Miracles & Nature, and Matter & Force generally take a common pattern, treating Clarke's and Leibniz's views on these topics independently, and then together as they are

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engaged in the Correspondence. So the book is not just topically and textually thorough (there is hardly any bit of the Correspondence that is not taken up at some point or other): in presenting his discussion as he does, Vailati in effect gives us a crash-course on Clarke. That is a fourth virtue worth noting. Since the work of Ferguson in the 1970's, Clarke has received less attention than he arguably deserves. Vailati's book will, one hopes, serve as a small step in the direction of bringing Clarke back into the historical discussion.

## II.

It is unseemly to carp at (finally!) a book on the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence with these virtues. If pressed — and I suppose a reviewer *is* pressed —, my first inclination is to wish aloud for a degree of philosophical depth matching the breadth of the Correspondence itself and the historical and exegetical richness of Vailati's chapters. The inclination hasn't much staying power: one works with what is before one, and the Correspondence is no gold mine. Not, at any rate, if one approaches it with expectations set in place by (say) the correspondence with Arnauld or De Volder or even Des Bosses, hoping to get clearer about Leibniz's deepest metaphysics. The exception of course is Leibniz's discussion of space and time. But most of his deep metaphysics remains well below a hard layer of rancorous dispute, and the promising flashes of philosophical theology and natural philosophy pan out to be little more than that. Vailati suspects that the relative neglect of the Correspondence arises from "the notorious obscurity of Newton's theological and metaphysical views, and the historical judgment that Clarke was little more than Newton's mouthpiece" (p. 4). Perhaps that is right. Still, obscurity is opportunity for the commentator on philosophical texts, and while Vailati does well enough at tracing veins of historical connection from Newton and Clarke to other figures (Descartes, Gassendi, Locke etc.), the philosophical goods on the side of Leibniz (and Newton and Clarke) are, well, *thin*: one wishes that the issues themselves had been plunged a bit more deeply than they are.

The fault—if that is the right word—is not exactly Vailati's. If one inevitably finds the Correspondence to be rather more on the tedious side of nit-picky back-and-forth, less on the side of real philosophical headway, one can scarcely chalk it up simply to the picking at nits and back-and-forth: we get those in the exchanges with Arnauld and De Volder, but to real advantage. The context of the exchange with Clarke is unhappily different. Following Keill's public accusations of pla-

giarism in the 1708 *Philosophical Transactions*, the Royal Society's general mis-handling of that whole affair, Newton's less-than-subtle jabs at Leibniz via Conti's preface to the second edition (1713) of the *Principia*, and plenty more else, Leibniz's animosity was deep enough to prohibit anything like a good-willed effort to *learn* from Clarke; and given the origin of the Correspondence—a serious charge to the effect that the Newtonians embraced a theologically compromising natural philosophy speeding the decay of natural religion in England—Clarke as Newtonian spokesman was ill-positioned to do much better in return. The exchange too frequently and too quickly degenerates. A familiar case concerns the relation of God to space: in his first letter Leibniz says (Lz 1.3) that space according to Newton is God's *sensorium* (an idea at which, Leibniz confesses to Bernoulli a few months earlier in 1715, he [Leibniz] had laughed aloud); Clarke replies (Cl 1.3) that Newton said no such thing, but only that space is *like* a *sensorium*; Leibniz replies (Lz 2.3) that Newton does too say such a thing, expressly in the Appendix to the *Opticks*; Clarke changes the focus (Cl 2.3) by noting that 'sensory' denotes not an organ but the place of sensation; Leibniz retorts (Lz 3.10) by citing Goclenius's *Dictionarium Philosophicum*, which defines 'sensorium' as "the organ of sensation"; Clarke in turn (Cl 3.10) cites Scapula's *Lexicon Graeco-Latinum*, which defines it differently (not mentioning that it also defines it in Leibniz's way), and insists that in any case the issue isn't Goclenius' meaning but Newton's; Leibniz (Lz 4.28) reminds Clarke that "the design of dictionaries is to show the use of words"; Clarke mercifully calls it quits (Cl 4.24-28), though can't resist noting one last time that Newton meant not that space *is* God's *sensorium*, but that space is *tanquam* His *sensorium*; Leibniz is still rankled enough (Lz 5.78) to call the latter as "improper and unintelligible" as the former. There is no progress here. One wants to say: "Look, gentlemen: let's talk about the mode of divine cognition generally, about the extent of Creator-creature similitude implicit in an *imago Dei* theology, about...." The case is admittedly an extreme one, but there are too many others like it, with a similar tone. The back-and-forth charges of question-begging, when it comes to the Identity of Indiscernibles, frustrates the exchange itself and the reader too; each is prepared to charge the other with succumbing to empty scholastic jargon; Clarke often (and Leibniz on occasion) looks for all the world to be cheating, and indeed sometimes to talk right past his interlocutor. Vailati is thorough and patient with the two philosophers—catching each episode of cheating, and faithfully supplying un-stated but relevant presumptions contributing to lack of common ground.

If at times his book reads a bit too much like the Correspondence itself, one can only wish that Leibniz and Clarke had been good enough to give Vailati something better to work with.

### III

I have, of course, over-stated things. There are nuggets in the Correspondence, philosophical veins inviting us to follow them outside the exchange with Clarke into whatever other territory — textual or interpretive or just plain philosophical — they might lead. Vailati's book does indeed remind us of just how wide is the range of philosophical issues broached in the Correspondence, and does so by providing us with a genuinely helpful set of launching-points to pursue those issues. Let me illustrate with just one cluster of launching points that might repay more attention, relevant to the chapter on God.

Where Leibniz was keen to go with a traditional view of God as substantially removed from the natural, spatio-temporal world, Clarke was not: God's necessary existence entails His eternity and immensity, and these—contra most of the scholastics—are intelligible only as His existing *always* and *everywhere*. Space is thus an essential property of God. Among Leibniz's many familiar complaints about the relation of God to space are that (i) an infinite absolute space would thus be a necessary, eternal and immutable existent distinct from God, and that (ii) an infinitely extended God would thus have parts. To the first of these Clarke replies that although space is eternal and immense and immutable, still "it does not at all from hence follow that anything is eternal *hors de dieu*, for space and duration are not *hors de dieu* but are caused by and are immediate and necessary consequences of his existence" (Cl 4.10); to the second he replies (Cl 3.3) that "infinite space is one, absolutely and essentially indivisible...There is no difficulty here but what arises from the figurative abuse of the word 'parts'." Both the criticisms and the replies are full of difficulties—instructive difficulties pointing in part to the utter *queerness* of Newtonian space. Or anyway, of Clarkean space and its relation to God, the metaphysical details of which Vailati does not pursue in depth.

Sticking with Clarke in respect of (i), and leaving Leibniz for (ii), we have this: on the one hand, space is reckoned a property of God *modulo* his immensity (which is an essential attribute); on the other hand, space is said to be caused by but not to be outside of Him; and then—there are three hands—space is something extended in which created material bodies are located but God is not. What is one to do

with all this? The causal claim is hard to figure (necessary properties scarcely being caused by God), unless perhaps one goes the neo-Platonist route of More: wedding his *Enchiridion metaphysicum* and his *The Immortality of the Soul*, one might connect space with God by claiming both that whatever is consequent on the divine nature is an *effectus emanativus* and that divine immensity is an essential property of God—space emerging at once as an emanative effect and identical *in re* to the divine immensity or infinite presence of God’s extended being. Newton himself approximated that route in *De gravitatione* 9, claiming that extended space “does not subsist absolutely per se, but is as it were an emanative effect of God (*sed tanquam Dei effectus emanativus*).” But Newton, like Gassendi, will say that space is neither substance nor property, and the ‘tanquam’ signals something other than a causal reading of the relation between God and space. That relieves some of the tension, only to leave the metaphysical status of space largely mysterious. Space for Newton is an essential “affection”—not of any existing substance (which would place it among the *propria*) but of being or existence itself. Says Newton in *De gravitatione* 103, “Space is an affection of being insofar as it is being” (*Spatium est entis quatenus ens affectio*)—adding that both space and duration are affections relative to God’s quantity of existence or “amplitude of presence.” Thus divine immensity, and so omnipresence, consists in the fact that the quantity of existence in God is infinite. As he puts it in the famous General Scholium of the *Principia* (1713), God “is not duration and space, but he endures and is present....and by existing always and everywhere, he constitutes duration and space.” The language of “constitution” (*constituit*) for Newton is neither the language of identity, nor of causal effect, nor of property-inherence. So what exactly that language does express is pretty obscure. But Clarke in any case isn’t toeing the Newtonian line, in the Correspondence itself. Leibniz had waded in with the knife of a traditional substance-property distinction, which won’t cut at the joints Newton sees. Clarke struck out on his own with what seems like the category of property, as he had done earlier in *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*—though in the less emotionally charged exchange with Butler, he is prepared to grant that calling space a property of God is “not perhaps a very proper expression, nor is it easy to find such” (Clarke, *Works* = W 2.748). Indeed! By the time of the 1720 French edition of the Correspondence, he (and, you can bet, Newton) had gotten Des Maizeaux to clarify the whole affair in an *Avertissement au Lecteur*: when Clarke calls divine immensity (space) a property of God, “he does not take the terms ‘quality’ or ‘property’ in

the same sense in which those who treat of Logic or Metaphysics take these terms....He merely wants to say that space and duration are modes of existence....”<sup>1</sup> If that is what Clarke really meant in the Correspondence, then it is no wonder that he and Leibniz (who treated of Logic and Metaphysics) tended simply to speak past one another—no wonder that Clarke should view the Leibnizian thesis that (say) space depends upon created bodies as literal nonsense. Whether Clarke could have explained his (or indeed Newton’s) metaphysic of space in terms that Leibniz might have grasped is unclear, but the honest truth is that nothing much like that is ever attempted. It just never goes that far. I suspect that Vailati could help us with all this, if anyone could.

And what of the second of Leibniz’s complaints about the relation of God to space noted above, to the effect that (ii) an infinitely extended God would have parts? In *A Demonstration* Clarke had said that infinite space “is nothing but abstract Immensity” (W 2.538). In the Correspondence he denied that space has parts: to speak of parts of space “arises from the figurative abuse of the word ‘parts’,” since there are in fact no genuine “partitions” in space (Cl 3.3): infinite continuous space no more has parts than a finite line is composed of infinitesimals; and space is only conceived by the imagination as being composed of parts (Cl 4.11 - 13). Knowing full well that Clarke did not wish to put space into the category of substance, and knowing of the general Newtonian attack on Descartes’ doctrine of material extension, a good-willed Leibniz might have sought more congenially to compare the abstract immensity of God, said to have no parts strictly speaking, with his *own* account of space as an abstract continuum having no real parts. The metaphysical character of Leibniz’s space proscribes regarding it as a whole composed of prior parts: “Space, like time, is not something substantial....There are no divisions in it but such as are made by the mind” (G II, 278-79; cf. G II, 268-69). When Leibniz accuses Clarke of “seeking yet another subterfuge by departing from the received sense of words” on the issue of parts, claiming in effect that we can at least conceive of parts of Clarkean space “by lines and surfaces that may be drawn and described in it” (Lz V.51), surely he is being less than helpful. He knew better than to ask for parts of a continuum. Whether Leibniz might have gotten Clarke to clarify the ontological status of space (and indeed divine simplicity) by noting respects of deep agreement between them is unclear; but again, it just never goes that far, and one suspects that Vailati could have helped us in that direction.

## IV

That is a quick sketch, illustrating just one of what I have in mind as “launching points” in the Correspondence itself and in Vailati’s book: there are so many others. On the side of issues theological, Vailati’s chapter on Free Will offers a rich context from which to begin a discussion of Leibniz and Clarke on divine freedom. Clarke feigns acceptance of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) in §1 of his Second Letter. But as Leibniz argues, no one endorsing PSR worthy of the name—of a kind required in Clarke’s own cosmological argument, for example—can permit God to be confronted with indiscernible options about (say) where in space to create the world. Vailati notes (p. 81) that PSR itself threatens Clarke’s argument for divine agency, but of course it threatens contingency across the board for everyone. (Supposing the whole of all contingent truth(s) C to have a sufficient reason R, it would seem that R can’t be contingent—else C, containing its own sufficient reason and being true by its own nature, emerges as necessary; but neither, it would seem, can R be necessary—else C, being true whenever R is, i.e. at all worlds, emerges as necessary.) Clarke in any case went soft on PSR, as perhaps most agency theorists will in the end. In his next chapter on Space and Time, Vailati might have posed the worry that Leibniz must go soft on PSR as well, if spatial vacua are metaphysically possible for the relationalist (p. 117): the abstract structure of possible locations permits unoccupied places, with no intrinsic difference among them. (If the softness is there—as further evidence from modally timid statements of the Identity of Indiscernibles might suggest —, then however strongly the reasons of divine goodness might seem to constrain the divine will, Leibniz can say that since PSR is only hypothetically necessary, God’s choice to create as He did is contingent.) The modal concerns ramify. In sketching the structure of time, we are to reckon instants as “constructed” sets of simultaneous events (p. 120-21). But if not only *actual* simultaneous events, what constraints on possible events shall we invoke? A cluster of worries looms large here, together threatening to conspire against the intelligibility of transworld temporal comparison, against securing any truth-value for claims to the effect Christ died at some time but might have done so later, or that Clinton sinned at some time but might not have. (Rescue modal discourse about individuals however you like. If some actual event *e*—relative to which all others actually or possibly simultaneous round out the instant *t*—is essential to *t*, then *t* exists only if the actual event *e* occurs, and *e* couldn’t have happened elsewhere. But if no actual

event  $e$  is essential to  $t$ , then, so to speak, anything can happen at any time. Causal considerations may be of help, but then perhaps not, if one takes Leibniz's putative commitment (p. 121) to presentism seriously: causation is a trans-temporal relation. And so on.)

Vailati has written a useful book. Readers can learn much from it, by being driven back to the texts for a second look, and by accepting the challenge to take its topics deeper than the Correspondence takes them.

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<sup>1</sup> Draft E of the *Avertissement*, given at p. 101 of A. Koyré and I. B. Cohen, "Newton and the Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence," *Archives Internationales d'Histoire des Sciences* 15 (1962), 63-126.