

Paul Lodge (editor): *Leibniz and His Correspondents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Pp. 310.

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Every four years the American voting public is subjected to a series of “debates” between candidates for the American Presidency. All of us who have witnessed these spectacles know that they are unsatisfying for a variety of reasons, perhaps none more than that the candidates involved typically fail to *debate* at all. Rather than actually engaging each other’s view in serious and thoughtful ways, each candidate describes his own position in sufficiently vague terms, and perhaps lobs a gratuitous insult or two at the opponent. At the end of the debate, spectators feel well-versed in the slogans of partisan politics, and woefully uninformed about the relative merits of the candidates’ positions.

Perhaps one has little reason to expect better from our political candidates; but when Leibniz engaged the great philosophical minds of his time in correspondence, one would have reason to expect that genuine philosophical progress would be in the making. Leibniz is well known for his willingness to engage the philosophical weaknesses of his own views, and such honesty and humility would, one might suppose, serve him and his interlocutors well as they sought to resolve the key philosophical issues on which they disagreed.

Or so one might have thought. In *Leibniz and His Correspondents* the contributors provide us with a glimpse of the Leibniz we often fail to see. Leibniz scholars know that some of Leibniz’s philosophical correspondence is focused and fruitful. In these essays, however, we often find Leibniz, and just as often his correspondents, acting like politicians—failing to understand each other’s positions, and often failing to engage those positions even when they do understand them. On some occasions the failure is due to simple thick-headedness, while on other occasions the breakdown of communication appears to be intentional and, sometimes, even downright malicious.

Despite this, the contributors to this volume are able to mine the correspondence they treat in ways that deliver two very fruitful outcomes. First, they are able to extract some significant philosophical mileage from the letters—mileage which shows us Leibniz’s own thinking evolving sometimes in spite of the remarks of his interlocutors. Second they often reveal to us the personal side of the Leibnizian philosophical drama: Leibniz’s attempts to win his teacher’s affection and intellectual respect,

his attempt to impress members of Royal Society in order to gain swift admission, and perhaps most movingly his increasingly desperate attempts to keep his dear friend and patron—and recently crowned queen of England—Caroline, from being won over by the persuasive arguments of the Newtonians encircling her court.

Lest the reader think that all of this makes the volume much ado about nothing, let me be clear: there is a great deal of important history and philosophy revealed in these essays. The history is more personal and social than intellectual in nature; the philosophy too is revealing, not so much because of successful engagement, but rather because we can see Leibniz revising his views as he uses these letters as an opportunity to think through his pen.

As Lodge notes in the introduction, the essays approach the various correspondences in different ways. Some attempt to detail Leibniz's philosophical evolution over the course of an entire correspondence, others to highlight Leibniz's discussion of a particular philosophical topic within a correspondence, and others to explore significant philosophical, social, or religious interests Leibniz had as exemplified by a particular correspondence. Let me take these in reverse order.

The essays by Philip Beeley, Franklin Perkins, and Gregory Brown fall into the third category. Beeley spends most of his essay showing how Leibniz's compatriot, Henry Oldenburg, used his position of influence as Secretary of the Royal Society to assist Leibniz, first by making his works in mathematics, physics, and logic known to a wide and influential audience and second by working, successfully, to gain Leibniz admission to the Society. Readers looking for more insight into Leibniz's struggles with Cartesian and Aristotelian metaphysics in this period will wish for more philosophical enlightenment concerning some of provocative philosophical remarks that emerge in the correspondence, topics Beeley does not address here.

Perkins provides an engaging account of the motives and substance of Leibniz's interest in Chinese philosophy and religion. The essay, summarizing some of the key information in Perkins' book, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light*, examines the correspondence between Leibniz and Jesuits residing in China. The correspondence shows Leibniz taking a genuine interest in Chinese thought for typically Leibnizian reasons. First, in his irenic optimism, Leibniz is convinced that there are insights to be gained from Chinese thought, especially Chinese moral teaching. Second, Leibniz is seeking to find common ground between traditional Chinese religion, most notably Confucianism, and Christianity as a way of assisting the missionary activity of the Church in China. Third, the opportunistic Leibniz was also seeking insights on how best to establish land trade routes to

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China through Russia. While it is clear that Leibniz thinks that Chinese thought is indeed advanced on many fronts, one senses that Perkins sometimes goes overboard in attributing charity to Leibniz's views towards the Chinese. Remarks such as "Leibniz's confidence in the ability of reason to lead China to religion comes from a basic commonality, in that the Chinese are assumed to have made some progress along both sides of the path already. Both Europeans and Chinese have perspectives on the same universe, so the goal of the missionaries is to help clarify the Chinese perspective" (p.152) provide one example. Since Leibniz praises the missionary efforts of the Jesuits' work of "propagation of the Christian religion" it is hard to believe that he was merely hoping that the Chinese might gain some clarity of perspective on their own religious beliefs. Nonetheless it is remarkable to find the charity of spirit we find in Leibniz towards religious systems that appear so radically different from his own.

The third essay in this category, by Gregory Brown, presents the touchingly told tale of Leibniz's interactions with his close friend and philosophical interlocutor, Caroline who, along with Leibniz's patron Georg Ludwig, had departed Hanover to assume the throne of England. In light of Leibniz's disdain for the Newtonians it is easy to sense, on the one hand, Leibniz's fear that the Hanoverian succession would be won over by his intellectual nemesis and, on the other hand, his vain hope that he might come to have a position (perhaps even court mathematician!) that would once and for all provide his vindication over Newton himself. In a moving account, Brown details the story in which Leibniz's hopes are dashed and his worst fears realized. For anyone who feels that they have never had an opportunity to peer inside Leibniz the man, this essay alone justifies the purchase of the volume.

The second group of essays traces the development of a philosophical theme through a particular correspondence. Martha Bolton scrutinizes the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence, examining whether or not, in this exchange, Leibniz takes the extended aspect of substance to both exist and be what it is apart from our conceiving of it as such, and whether or not the infinite complexity of material substances undermines Leibniz's claim that they count as genuine unities. Much of the discussion is devoted to Arnauld's (largely unsuccessful) attempts to extract from Leibniz an explanation of why aggregates cannot be constituted of aggregates-all-the-way-down and how (apparently divisible) substantial forms could supply the requisite unity to composite substances. The essay succeeds beautifully in clarifying Arnauld's misgivings, which forced issues of clarification from Leibniz about the failure of Cartesian accounts of body and about his own take

on substantial forms. Crucially, Bolton engages Leibniz's arguments—not merely isolating and expounding them but also in motivating and evaluating them. Along the way, she critically discusses the secondary literature, while at the same time setting Leibniz's engagement with Cartesianism and his own positive proposals for corporeal substance in the light of Platonic and Aristotelian themes. All of this results in a clear picture of the dialectic, and a better understanding of Leibniz's position and its shortcomings. While no explicit and fully worked out solution is supplied, Bolton attributes to Leibniz a modified Aristotelianism which denies divisibility of substantial forms.

Paul Lodge devotes his essay to an examination of Leibniz's critical reactions to Cartesian metaphysics as defended by Burchard de Volder. In addition to dualism, de Volder defended a metaphysic of corporeal substance that Leibniz rejected from early on. Among the key issues discussed in the essay are de Volder's commitment to a notion of substance cast in terms of *per se* conceivability, and a further commitment to the notion that qualitative and quantitative diversity among material substance were to be explained by appeal to modes of extension. Leibniz raises a variety of arguments against both claims. For example, he repeatedly presses de Volder with arguments aimed at showing that each of these claims entails Spinozistic monism. In reply, de Volder sometimes waffles, sometimes refuses to flinch in the face of the monistic conclusion, and sometimes seems to misunderstand Leibniz's arguments altogether. Thus, while we do not find Leibniz persuading de Volder over to his side, we do get a clear grasp of some of the arguments that Leibniz took to be most powerful against Cartesian conceptions of material substance.

Brandon Look's essay provides an engaging survey of Leibniz's discussion of the *vinculum substantiale* in the correspondence with Bartholomew Des Bosses. In his central letter of February 1712, Leibniz proposes a dilemma: either bodies are to be understood as mere phenomena, or there must be a metaphysical super-glue in virtue of which a composite body constitutes an *unum per se*. Leibniz does not endorse the reality of the *vinculum* as much as consider the contours of such a thing were we to be forced (perhaps, he considers, by way of faith commitments) to accept the substantiality of corporeal substance. As Look notes, the difficulties here are formidable. As Leibniz describes it in the correspondence, genuine corporeal substances must on the one hand have primitive active and passive powers and, on the other hand, "arise from the union of monads." The problem then is how to distinguish substances from "mere" aggregates. Sums of monads will exhibit dispositions that are the sum of their individual powers. But the primitive powers of

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genuine substances must be more than mere vector sums. So what is it that makes the powers of sets of monads into a singular active power and a singular passive power? Look considers three possibilities, all of which, in the end, seem less than satisfying. Leibniz could hold that the forces of the constituents are unified by virtue of some aspect of the constituent monads themselves, or in virtue of some distinct unifying entity, or in virtue of the fact that the constituent forces can be represented or understood as constituting a unity. Any solution, it seems, requires hypothesizing either a conception of unity that is extrinsic in a way that precludes *per se* unity, or an ontological entity over and above perceptions and appetitions.

In the correspondence with Lady Masham, Leibniz undertakes what appears to be unabashed attempt to attract the attention of her house guest, John Locke. Leibniz was, of course, just completing his work on the *New Essays* and the prospect of opening up a direct line of communication with Locke was, to say the least, enticing. The ulterior motive casts doubts on the seriousness of Leibniz's philosophical discussions in the letters. Nevertheless, Pauline Phemister argues that Leibniz's defense of the "Principle of Uniformity" in the correspondence merits close scrutiny. Phemister shows how Leibniz applies this principle, summarized in the phrase "everywhere and all the time, everything's the same as here," to topics as wide-ranging as the nature of material substance, sensation and reflection, and to his panpsychist metaphysic. The application leads to some awkward and unexpected results which Phemister examines in detail. Among those results, Phemister claims, is that Leibniz is obliged to hold that all entelechies will one day be "rational, free creatures of a moral Kingdom." It is hard to see exactly why such a conclusion is "mandated" however. Perhaps her idea is that if *some* rational monads secure such an end, *all* will since they are all "the same." But arguments of this sort are too hasty. Any use of the Uniformity Principle will require specifying exactly what "sameness" amounts to and, whatever Leibniz *says*, he cannot understand "sameness" in the most strict sense. Perceiving substances will differ if, in nothing else, point of view. Once we allow differences of this sort, it is hard to know just how much similarity is required from one "place" to another.

The last essay in this group is written by Daniel Garber and focuses not on any correspondence, but rather on notes which Leibniz took in the wake of a conversation with the Italian Cartesian Fardella. Garber has for some years been concerned to show that Leibniz in his "middle-years" was not so obviously committed to monadological idealism about bodies as he was in his maturity; this essay offers a further look at this issue. The essay contributes to our understanding of the

middle-years Leibniz, and extends the current debate about Leibniz's views on body; indeed, its main proposal is to change our thinking away from the idealist-realist debate, and in the direction of a debate between a Cartesian-analysis-of-body and alternatives to that analysis. Garber cites a remark in the notes which seems to show that Leibniz has moved towards one of those alternatives, but that the alternative is not yet the idealism of his maturity. The remark is: "I do not say that the body is composed of souls, nor that the body is constituted by an aggregate of souls, but that it is constituted by an aggregate of substances. Moreover, the soul, properly and accurately speaking, is not a substance, but a substantial form, or the primitive form, or the primitive form existing in substances, the first act, the first active faculty" (131). Garber takes it that the negative claim, that bodies are not collections of souls, and the positive claim, that souls are substantial forms of bodies, argues for a realist notion of corporeal substance at this stage of Leibniz's thought.

In the final group of essays are papers by Christian Mercer, Stuart Brown and Donald Rutherford. The volume begins with an essay by Mercer that treats the somewhat disappointing correspondence between Leibniz and Thomasius, largely re-tracing ground she covers in her *Leibniz's Metaphysics*. Here we find the early Leibniz attempting to convince his former teacher that the new mechanical philosophy was indeed compatible with an Aristotelian conception of substance according to which form can be accounted for in mechanical terms. Specifically, Leibniz is convinced that form can be understood in terms of quantitative features of substances explained by appeal to the motion of its parts. While Leibniz's own thought progresses through the series of letters, most notably concerning the way in which the relevant motion is to be explained, it is not really due to any help from Thomasius. Indeed, the best Mercer can offer on Thomasius' behalf are two remarks generously described as "astute," namely, that the view proposed by Leibniz seems impotent to explain formal substantial properties of human beings, and that the view seems to collapse into an infinite regress. The nature of the regress is not explained, but one is led to suppose that it is a regress of causes of motion in terms of which form is to be explained. Why Thomasius thought such a regress might arise is perplexing, at least since Leibniz indicates that the regress ultimately terminates with the activity of God.

Stuart Brown profiles Leibniz brief but often revealing correspondence with the French skeptic Simon Foucher. Leibniz met Foucher during his years in Paris and wrote thirteen letters to him from the time of his return to Hannover until Foucher's

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death. Brown's essay on this correspondence accomplishes two primary goals. First, it provides us with a summary of what Brown takes to be the six phases of the correspondence. Second, although Leibniz and Foucher discuss a number of issues, Brown's essay provides us with an analysis of their discussion of higher-level issues of philosophical methodology. While this yields a number of interesting results, the most important is Brown's showing us the way in which Leibniz vacillates in his commitment to the Academic skepticism about which they seem to be in initial agreement. Brown concludes that when Leibniz reflects on the correspondence in the years after Foucher's death, his enthusiasm for skepticism wanes as he comes to embrace a lower justificatory standard for knowledge, namely, that of "moral certainty."

Finally, Donald Rutherford takes up the correspondence between Leibniz and Christian Wolff, focusing especially on Leibniz's attempts to recruit Wolff to his brand of idealism. Leibniz and Christian Wolff corresponded for over ten years, exchanging many letters, and Leibniz contributed much to Wolff's philosophical development. But from Wolff's day to our own there has been little discussion of the real extent to which Wolff's philosophy is indeed indebted to Leibniz. Rutherford's essay is a very helpful contribution to the philosophical part of a history that has not yet been fully appreciated. Rutherford argues that owing to this exchange, Wolff was well-situated to understand and accept Leibniz's brand of idealism, and that he ultimately declined the offer. The crucial moments in the exchange occur in the summer of 1711 when Leibniz makes it clear that he understands the grounding relation between the world of appearances and the world of monads is to be understood in terms of three theses: [UG] All composite things are grounded in true unities, [FG] All physical forces are grounded in substantial principles of force, and [MG] All matter is grounded in monads. Rutherford shows that Leibniz took the truth of [UG] and [FG] to entail or at least provide powerful reason to accept [MG]. This was the move or inference that Wolff rejects, unfortunately without much argument.

Of the canonical seventeenth and eighteenth century European philosophical figures, Leibniz has few published writings to his credit. As a result, those looking to trace his philosophical thought resort to the voluminous correspondence and private notes where we can see Leibniz wrestling with the ideas that vexed him. The essays in this volume provide a look at a wide-range of Leibniz's correspondence spanning different phases of his philosophical life, and different topics in his philosophical repertoire. Readers will be richly rewarded by these essays, some of

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which provide the first or most detailed treatment of these exchanges in English.

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