

**Pauline Phemister, *Leibniz and the Natural World: Activity, Passivity and Corporeal Substances in Leibniz's Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005. Pp. 293.**

**Reviewed by Justin E. H. Smith, Concordia University**

**M**atter as the principle that both limits and particularizes an otherwise merely homogeneous abstraction is a conception very familiar in many different schools of ancient thought. Leibniz was well aware of this. He himself mentions the Patristic authors in this connection in his *On What is Independent of Sense and Matter*: “I am inclined,” he writes, “to think that all finite immaterial substances (even genii or angels according to the opinion of the old Church Fathers) are joined to organs and accompany matter” (GP VI 507 / AG 192 / L 552 / PP 80). Thus for the Church Father Origen, God made corporeal nature in order to facilitate the permutations of qualities in things, and it is necessary for corporeal nature to endure only “as long as souls who need a corporeal garment last” (Origen, *On First Principles*, Book IV, in *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, tr. Rowan A. Greer [Mauwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979], 214).

Nobody would think to argue that Origen denied the existence of a ‘real’ bodily world. Instead, readers see his account of body for what it is: an *account* of body. *Mutatis mutandis*, one might expect that readers of Leibniz would similarly appreciate his account of the bodily world for what it is: a fascinating and complex alternative to physical atomism that takes force as its most basic notion, and seeks, not without difficulty, to harmonize the world of forces, motions and impacts with the world of perceiving and striving subjects, indeed to show that these are one and the same world. Yet this pan-European syncretist has all too often been cast in the role of a German Idealist *avant la lettre*, a role in which much of his talent goes unnoticed. Over the past few decades, a number of Anglophone scholars have been working to correct this miscasting. Pauline Phemister’s excellent new book is an important contribution to this ongoing project.

One way to get a handle on the principal concern of her book is by considering what she labels the ‘De Volder monad’. This is the entity Leibniz describes to De Volder in a letter of 20 June, 1703, as consisting in (1) the primitive entelechy or soul; (2) primary matter or primitive passive power; (3) the monad completed by these two (GP II 252 / AG 177 / L 530). The central problem for the interpretation laid out in Phemister’s book is to understand how this De Volder monad is related

to the corporeal substance. As most readers will know, in this letter Leibniz does not stop at (3), but goes on to identify (4) the organic machine in which innumerable subordinate monads concur; and (5) the corporeal substance or animal. One way to put the question that interests Phemister is to ask: could (3) exist alone, or does (3) always entail (5), and if so, how exactly do we get from (3) to (5)? For those who favor an 'idealist' interpretation of Leibniz, such as Robert Adams, (3) could exist alone, and if (5) exists at all it does so as an entirely separate substance. For Phemister, in contrast, you can't have one without the other, and her book amounts to a compelling, sustained argument why this must be so, an argument with which not everyone will agree, but which will certainly have to be seriously engaged in any future treatment of the subject.

A central focus of her analysis concerns how we are to understand the notions of 'complete' and 'incomplete' in Leibniz: are we to understand primary matter as 'completing' the entelechy, and thus the De Volder monad as 'complete', or are we to understand the organic body as completing the De Volder monad, and thus the corporeal substance or animal as complete, and the monad on its own as incomplete? For some, such as Donald Rutherford, 'soul' is shorthand for 'soul/primary matter unit', and thus talk of 'completion' of the monad is always completion of this unit by an organic body. Rutherford argues that primary matter is nothing more than "an aspect of a soullike form, which is associated with its degree of limitation or imperfection" (158). For Adams, there are two different senses of 'complete' in Leibniz. On the one hand, the soul and the primary matter would be incomplete if separated from one another, but together they complete one another, and they would remain complete in this respect even if they lacked a body, and even if they existed in a world without bodies. The De Volder monad and the corporeal substance are both in their own way complete, and to the extent that Leibniz admits corporeal substances, Adams thinks, these are substances that exist over and above the monad. The closest Leibniz comes to accepting a corporeal-substance metaphysics, Adams thinks, is to see the substance formed as a result of an organic body coming together with a De Volder monad as something distinct from the De Volder monad itself. On Adams's 'two-substance' view, the organic body does not complete the De Volder monad, as the monad is already in the most important sense complete in itself.

The completeness of the De Volder monad would be an argument in favor of idealism, since for any given De Volder monad all others could be destroyed, including those implicated in its organic body, and it could go on as if nothing had

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some actual existing thing rather than staying some homogeneous abstraction. Phemister gives compelling reasons why Rutherford's view cannot be right. She rightly notes that the soul is abstractly incomplete without primary matter because it cannot exist without this (34). But if the soul needs primary matter in order to be complete, and is incomplete without it (even if it never actually is without it), then surely the soul is not the same thing as the soul together with primary matter. Moreover, Phemister notes that in just the same way the unit consisting in soul and primary matter is naturally incomplete without the organic body. There is never a soul without primary matter, and there is never a soul/primary matter unit without an organic body.

One way of understanding the problem of the relation of (3) to (5) is in terms of the relation between perceptions and appetitions, on the one hand, and derivative forces on the other. On the 'idealist' view, the former are more basic than the latter, while for Phemister, both are equally derivative, equally modifications of the primitive forces. The perceptions and appetitions are *internal* modifications, while the derivative forces are *external* modifications. For Phemister, it is the primitive forces that are ontologically basic, and beyond these we cannot say of perceptions and appetitions on the one hand, or of derivative forces on the other, that the one is more basic than the other. "[P]erceptions, appetitions and derivative forces are all secondary to the primitive. All are mere modifications of primitive forces and equally non-basic" (222).

Perceptions cannot differ with respect to content, since all perceivers perceive everything. They only differ with respect to degrees of clarity, distinctness, and adequacy. But given that confusion and clarity admit of degrees, the view that these are modifications of their respective primitive forces would seem to compel us to hold the view also that primitive active force and primitive passive force differ only by degree. Recall in this connection that derivative forces are modifications of primitive forces just as perception and appetite. Derivative forces are external modifications of the primitive forces brought into being through the creation of the corporeal substance, while perceptions and appetitions are direct internal modifications of the De Volder monad 'and would occur even if it did not possess an organic body' (214). Thus confused perceptions and derivative passive forces both result from primitive passive forces, the former as internal and the latter as external, with the latter also giving rise to resistance. Distinct perceptions and derivative active forces also result from primitive active forces, with the latter giving rise to motion.

changed. We will return to this ‘argument from solipsism’ shortly, as it is crucial for Phemister’s understanding of what is at stake in the interpretation of the relation between De Volder monads and corporeal substances, or, which is the same, in the determination of which level, (3) or (5), is the one at which ultimate completeness may be attained.

Phemister for her part argues that a soul by itself would be incomplete, were it ever to occur. However, the soul is not only completed by primary matter, this soul/primary matter unit --the De Volder monad—is in turn completed by an organic body. For this reason, Phemister holds against Adams that the relation of the corporeal substance to the De Volder monad is not that of one substance to another, but of one substance to itself. “The De Volder monad,” she writes,

is the foundation from which the complete corporeal substance springs. The complete corporeal substance is the De Volder monad together with its modifications (its perceptions, appetitions and organic body). As its particular qualities unfold from its essence, the complete corporeal substance comes into being. The relation between the De Volder monad and the complete corporeal substance is therefore akin to a relation of different stages of development of the same substance (39).

Phemister notes that our natural inclination is to read Leibniz’s list of ingredients as a “logical progression through five stages” (50). She maintains however that it is not necessary to see it this way. It is not in her view a logical progression, nor yet an ontological development moving through distinct temporal stages (even if talk of “different stages of development” may suggest as much). In fact, there is no progression from (3) to (5) because, she argues, (5) simply is (3) in its actualized state.

For Phemister, both an entelechy without primary matter and an entelechy/primary matter unit without an organic body would be naturally incomplete, but none such are to be found in nature. The combination of primary matter and entelechy leads always and with natural necessity to the complete corporeal substance. Primary matter is completed not just by ‘its’ dominant entelechy, but also by the infinitely many others constituting the organic body of the corporeal substance. In turn, the soul is completed not just by the monad’s primary matter, but also by the secondary matter of the organic body. Without the soul or entelechy together with which primitive passive power constitutes a monad, this power would, as Phemister puts it, “revert to a mere homogeneous abstraction” (48). Together with the soul or entelechy, in contrast, the primitive passive power is ‘completed’, rendered

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But where does appetite fit into this scheme? On an idealist interpretation, such as that of Adams, the derivative forces are seen as resulting from monadic perceptions and appetitions. This would be the monadological phenomenalist view of things, to be discussed shortly. Phemister maintains that Leibniz conceives appetitions as the individual, instantaneous impulsions that move the monad's mental state from one perception to another, and that in this way "the appetite acts as the mental counterpart to the derivative active forces" (215). Phemister sees both confused perceptions and derivative passive force as resulting from primitive passive force, and derivative active force and appetitions as being brought about by primitive active force. Distinct perceptions, in turn, are brought about by appetitions. But there is a problem here, which Phemister rightly acknowledges, namely, that all perceptions, even confused ones, are the result of appetitions, and so of primitive active force.

In the De Volder correspondence, the derivative, secondary matter is explicitly identified as only a modification and resultant of primitive forces (AG 176). Primitive forces, in turn, are identified as "nothing but the internal strivings of simple substances, strivings by means of which they pass from perception to perception in accordance with a certain law of their own nature" (AG 181). Here, then, the monad has two ingredients, both its primitive active power, or entelechy or soul; and its primitive passive power or primary matter. Mass or secondary matter results from the infinite aggregation of the primitive passive powers of innumerable monads, while "the animal, that is, the corporeal substance" is made one by the active or clear perception of the dominating monad that is its soul. Mass results from the primitive passive powers of monads, and these primitive passive powers can, if one wishes, be accounted for in terms of internal strivings. The greater the appetite, the more distinct the perception, and vice versa. The stronger the primitive passive force, the more confused the perception.

A monad, then, consists in primitive passive and active force, and these give rise both to perception and to derivative force. But it is not only the subject that we may understand in terms of perception. We may also understand the world as in some sense constituted by objects of perception. This is a view commonly known as phenomenism, and in chapter 7, Phemister surveys three varieties of it, in the aim of determining whether there is some understanding of Leibniz that may be retained in the context of the corporeal-substance realism she attributes to him. The first variety is 'spiritual phenomenism', according to which only rational spirits exist and bodies are nothing other than the shared contents of their percep-

tions. Phemister rightly notes that the evidence for this is slight in Leibniz, and moves on to monadological phenomenalism, a view she attributes to Adams. On this view, as on spiritual phenomenalism, phenomena are internal to the soul, but nonetheless phenomenal bodies are well-founded in the sense that the substances that are aggregated together by acts of perception really do exist as souls or substantial forms and primary matter independently of the perceiver who aggregates them. Phemister herself prefers corporeal substance phenomenalism, which like the monadological kind appeals to acts of perception that unify substances into aggregate bodies, but which, unlike the other kind, holds that there are real corporeal substances that exist independently of being perceived even if their aggregate bodies do not. Leibniz admits that there are such things as ‘external phenomena’. As Phemister describes these, they are well-founded because they are “aggregates of real [corporeal] substances that exist independently of their being aggregated” (170).

For Adams, as a monadological phenomenalist, only primitive forces are real, and derivative forces, as Adams puts it, are just part of the ‘story’ of science. For Phemister, though, derivative forces are, just like perceptions, modifications of the primitive forces of the De Volder monad. They are nonetheless real modifications. As Leibniz writes: “as for motion, what is real in it is force or power; that is to say, what there is in the present state which carries with it a change for the future. The rest is only phenomena and relations” (193). For Phemister, primitive active force is permanent, it relates to the ‘overall system’, and so cannot be appealed to, as Leibniz puts it in the *Specimen Dynamicum*, “when treating the individual and specific causes of sensible things (GM VI 236 / AG 119 / L 436 / PP 191). Derivative active force, in contrast, can be so invoked. This is nothing other than “what certain people call impetus, conatus, or a striving... toward some determinate motion” (GP IV / AG 253). Adams interprets this force, along with its passive counterpart, in terms of monadological phenomenalism. That is, for Adams derivative force is derivative *of* perception and appetite, whereas for Phemister both perception and appetite *and* derivative force are derivative of primitive force. The former is internal to the monad, and is what would be left over if all other monads were destroyed. The latter is external to the monad, is really there, and is not dependent on the perceptions of the monad.

For Phemister, there can be no reason to think of the existence of corporeal substances as depending on their being perceived even if, in contrast, the corporeal substances’ organic bodies, “when considered simply as aggregates of substances,

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are phenomena. Each aggregate body is a well-founded, external phenomenon and does, in part, depend upon being perceived in order to exist” (182). The argument seems to be this: the properties of an organic body are in the end dependent upon perception. But the organic body of a corporeal substance is one thing, the corporeal substance quite another, and the existence of the corporeal substance itself does not depend for its existence on being perceived. Corporeal substances exist, and as a matter of naturally necessary fact do perceive and are perceived, and to the extent that this is the case they are manifested under the aspect of bodiliness. For this distinction to make sense, it is crucial that the organism or organic body not be conflated with corporeal substance, as has often been permitted to happen.

By the end of chapter 8, we arrive at a formulation of the claim established in chapters 2 and 3 as to the true composition of the complete substance, but now in terms of derivative forces: the modification of the primitive forces as derivative forces requires the existence of the primitive and derivative forces of the subordinate substances in the organic body (207). Derivative active force is the momentary limitation of primitive force resulting from the conflux of bodies with one another. Derivative passive force is in turn the momentary force by which bodies are able to resist the motions of others. This is Leibniz’s answer to Cartesian extension or mass, which is for Leibniz, like motion, ultimately only phenomenal.

Another way of putting Phemister’s point about the ontological equality of perceptions and appetites on the one hand, and derivative forces on the other is this: confused and distinct perceptions are the inward succession of representations that correspond to the outward succession of orders of coexistence that make up the world. Primitive passive force gives rise both to confused perception and to derivative passive force, which in turn gives rise at the bodily level to resistance. Primitive active force gives rise both to appetite and clear perception, and to derivative active force, which at the bodily level in turn is manifested as motion. Harmony, which is treated in chapter 9, just is the agreement of these two distinct and non-basic orders, the inner and the outer. Nicholas of Cusa put it as follows a few centuries earlier: “the unicity in all living beings [is] the soul, and... the alterity [is] the body; what you see in the body as bodily and unfolded, that is, understand, in the soul in a manner appropriate to the soul... a force that enfolds the unfolding unity of corporeal nature” (Nicholas of Cusa, *De coniecturis* [Frankfurt: Meiner, 2002], 125)

Phemister’s argument has been to say that the two, unicity and alterity, the internal and the external, always go together and must go together in order for the totality

of Leibniz's commitments to add up to a coherent system. Those who argue in favor of the greater reality of perceptions over derivative forces – that is, in favor of 'idealism' – find their greatest ammunition in the point that monads are, in the end, windowless, and thus that they do not need the world of bodies around them in order to have the perceptions they do; yet, the reverse is not the case: derivative forces and the world of resistant bodies in motion that they sustain could not exist without the monads that underlie them. Thus, bodies need monads, but monads do not need bodies, the argument goes. But is that really the case?

One potential complication in this connection is that a De Volder monad would seem to be able to keep all of its perceptions and appetitions even if it were the only monad in the universe, whereas derivative forces are fundamentally dependent on the existence of the infinite aggregates of other monads that constitute organic bodies. Phemister agrees that this is the case, but contends that, always and with natural necessity, De Volder monads will exist along with their organic bodies and derivative forces. One of the important reasons for this natural necessity is that God does not choose among possible individuals, but among possible worlds, and worlds just are orders of coexistence of monads. As Phemister nicely puts it: "Given that God creates the whole universe in its entirety and at once, the priority accorded perceptions is unwarranted" (220).

If the solipsistic universe were the real one, that would indeed be idealism. But could it be the real one? Phemister accepts that a De Volder monad could exist on its own, indeed that the universe could consist in only one of these, even if it is 'naturally necessary' that it does not. Phemister writes that "the entelechy/primary matter monad could exist without an organic body (God could have created it alone)," even if "in practice and with natural necessity, the organic body is an integral aspect of it" (71). This point is made repeatedly throughout the book. Thus: "Appetitions and perceptions... as internal modifications, could still take place even if God had created that particular substance alone," whereas derivative forces "are only external modifications" and "cannot occur unless the substances that comprise those bodies have been created" (220).

From the *Discourse on Metaphysics* to the De Volder correspondence, Leibniz occasionally maintains that all perceptions would remain the same for a substance even if God were to destroy all the other substances with which it co-exists. But this contention is at odds with other aspects of Leibniz's understanding of the role of bodies: namely, the role of sense-perception in individuation (of creatures from one another, and of all of them from God), and, in turn, the necessary role of bodies

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in perception. The windowlessness of a monad is what makes a solipsistic universe a real possibility, yet as Phemister rightly notes Leibniz elsewhere gives good reasons why such a universe is not the actual one. In her view, “Leibniz allows the possibility of solipsism in order to reinforce the independence of substances from each other. When independence is not an issue, as here, it seems that solipsism even as a hypothesis is not entertained. A solitary monad is excluded by the very meaning Leibniz attaches to ‘existence’” (79).

Leibniz notes in the *New Method for Learning and Teaching Jurisprudence*, anything that does not have a body can be said to be but not to exist. A solo De Volder monad could not possess a physical body and could not be sense-perceived, and therefore could not exist. Put another way, it would be identical to God. But Phemister thinks that there is a stronger reason why the solipsistic universe cannot be actual, namely, that there would be no reason for God to outfit a soul with infinitely many insensible perceptions in each perceptual state. What would be the purpose of such perceptions, if the soul is not aware of them and they do not correspond to anything? (151). And moreover, Phemister argues, it is principally when Leibniz wishes to emphasize the causal independence of substances that he draws attention to the possibility of solipsism. In practice, this would nonetheless be strictly incompatible with other principles that Leibniz holds just as dear, such as perfection, plenitude, and sufficient reason.

In an early footnote (28 – chapter one, note 65), Phemister notes that “the differentiation of monads in terms of their perceptions and appetitions underlines the assumed similarity between the Leibnizian monad and the Cartesian soul because it concentrates attention only on the purely mental, perceptual features of the monads.” But this overlooks the fact that there is already an important difference between Descartes’ mental and Leibniz’s perceptual, namely, that perception is always perception of bodies. Descartes’ mental requires only that one be thinking; whereas for Leibniz it is just as certain that the mind or mind-like entity must be affected in various ways by a world. In this connection, Phemister provides a revealing example of the slipperiness of translation. In his *Critical Thoughts on the General Part of the Principles of Descartes*, Leibniz emends Descartes’s cogito argument as follows:

[T]he primary truths of fact can conveniently be reduced to these two: ‘I think’, and ‘Various things are thought by me’. Whence it follows not only that I am, but that I am affected in various ways (GP IV 357 / L 385).

In his influential 1976 study, *Leibniz: Perception, Apperception and Thought*, R. McRae translates ‘*varia a me cogitantur*’ as ‘various thoughts are thought by me’. Translation is an art and not a science, and clearly the translator here is artfully favoring the idealist reading of Leibniz. ‘*Varia*’ would be better translated as ‘various things’, and as Phemister rightly notes Leibniz adds this claim to Descartes’ ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ precisely to emphasize that it is no less basic that we are affected by things outside of us in various ways than it is that we ourselves think. Of course, in the end we are affected by them not as entities with causal force impinging upon our consciousness, since after all we are causally self-contained, windowless. But it is nonetheless in the nature of a monad to represent the order of co-existence to itself, and if there were no external substances there would be nothing to represent. Moreover, we have no choice but to represent them to ourselves as bodily, both because it is in the nature of any created monad to represent partially confusedly, and because it is in the nature of all of the monads it represents to manifest themselves through the derivative forces of motion and resistance, that is, to be embodied. As Leibniz eloquently puts it: “Creatures free or freed from matter would at the same time be divorced from the universal bond, like deserters from the general order” (*Considerations on Vital Principles and Plastic Natures, by the author of the System of Pre-established Harmony*, GP VI 546 / L 590 / PP 155).

Phemister’s book contains discussions of many other aspects of Leibniz’s philosophy which we will not have space to summarize here. Particularly impressive is her treatment in chapter 5 of the problem of mathematical and physical continuity in Leibniz. Phemister claims that bodies are real continua that differ from mathematical continua insofar as the former already actually have all of their parts, whereas in a line the whole exists prior to its parts. What is most rewarding in her treatment of continuity, as well as of other topics such as freedom and preestablished harmony, is the skill and clarity with which Phemister ties her treatment of these sundry aspects of Leibniz’s thought into her central concern with the problem of corporeal substance. Particularly with respect to continuity, Phemister (following Arthur 1998) explains why, for Leibniz, the labyrinth of the continuum arises from a confusion of the real and the ideal, and shows how he avoids this confusion largely in developing a complete and correct conception of substance. In a similar vein, Phemister shows how we may understand Leibniz’s analysis of freedom as of a kind with his analyses of both perception and bodily motion. Just as bodies are constituted from parts within parts *ad infinitum*, and just as conscious perception is but the tip of an iceberg underlain by infinitely many minute perceptions, so too

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is voluntary motion explicable only when it is seen as underlain by the motions of sensible parts, and these in turn by infinitely many imperceptible motions of insensible parts (253). Phemister's complete argument in chapter 10 is that human freedom is both limited and facilitated by the fact that substances are embodied, and thus that the Leibnizian account of freedom rests on an ontology of corporeal substances.

Phemister's interpretation of Leibniz promotes a view that in recent scholarship is often described as 'compatibilist', by which it is meant that apparently mutually contradictory passages in Leibniz can be understood in such a way that the contradiction gives way to harmony. Phemister's compatibilism has it that neither corporeal substance nor simple substance is ontologically prior, and that it is neither the case that body can be explained away in terms of perception nor that perception somehow results from the 'real' phenomena of resistance and motion. Of course, no one defends the latter of these two approaches to Leibniz, but the important work of the compatibilist is to show why we must resist the temptation to push for the one reduction – of all to perception – simply because the other clearly is not what Leibniz wanted.

Phemister's argument for compatibilism is internalist, by which we mean that she is concerned exclusively with the analysis of Leibniz's published and unpublished writings. This is a vital task, and she excels at it, though any future triumph of scholars combating the idealist interpretation of Leibniz will also have to include some concerned with the philosopher's peculiar reception history, that is, with the full story of how he came to be posthumously cast in the various roles in which his successors have enjoyed imagining him. For central to the argument against idealism is not the conviction that Leibniz was a self-identified anti-idealist, but only that positioning himself in terms of some idealist/realist divide was not, and could not have been, one of his foremost preoccupations, as this way of carving things up seems to come into fashion a good many years after 1716. Instead, Leibniz was concerned to give an account of the natural world of bodies in motion, and of the role perceiving subjects play in this world. Phemister's book is a clear and insightful study of this account, and deserves the attention of everyone who wishes to appreciate Leibniz in all his depth and range.

Justin E. H. Smith  
Department of Philosophy  
Concordia University

*JUSTIN E. H. SMITH*

1455 de Maisonneuve  
Montreal, Quebec H3G 1M8  
justismi@alcor.concordia.ca