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*Leibniz and the Natural World: Activity, Passivity and Corporeal Substances in Leibniz’s Philosophy*. By PAULINE PHEMISTER. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005. Pp. xiii + 293. Hardcover. Price €120.00, L83.00(pounds), sFr203.00, $149.00 (HB), ISBN 1-4020-3400-8).

In 1900 Bertrand Russell noted memorably that on first reading Leibniz he felt “that the *Monadology* was a kind of fantastic fairy tale, coherent perhaps, but wholly arbitrary” (xvii). This, indeed, is how it still comes out on the dominant interpretation in the English-speaking world. For on this idealist reading, Leibniz is portrayed as identifying the true referents of our thoughts and perceptions as immaterial monads whose only qualities are perceptions and appetitions. On this view, when we think we are perceiving material bodies, “we are in fact perceiving only immaterial monads whose perceptions and appetitions correspond to ours.” (Phemister, 153) Even though every monad has a body, these bodies are mere phenomena; they are aggregates of monads which are not in themselves material or extended, but which simply appear so to other percipients. A monad with its body is therefore simply an aggregation of immaterial monads. Again, even though every monad is a union of substantial form and matter, this matter is primary matter, and as such incomplete. While Leibniz equates substantial form with primitive active force, and primary matter with primitive passive force, it is clear that it is the active force that is basic. Thus when Leibniz tells De Volder in 1704 that “there is nothing in the world but simple substances, and in them, perception and appetite”, this is read as the claim that at bottom only immaterial substances exist.

Pauline Phemister’s book is a sustained attack on this idealist reading, and an argument for its replacement by an interpretation that takes living corporeal substances as the basic units of Leibniz’s ontology. The gist of her interpretation can be presented as follows: In a much-quoted letter to De Volder (20th June 1703), Leibniz presents the monad as a unity comprised of “the primitive entelechy or soul” together with “primary matter or primitive passive power” (31). This Phemister calls the “De Volder monad”, and it is to monads so understood that Robert Adams in his
highly influential interpretation takes Leibniz always to be ultimately referring. This lends support to Adams’ idealist reading, since such a monad can be regarded as a substance even in separation from its organic body (34). But, Phemister argues, a created monad is necessarily more than this. For primary matter is a pure potentiality, and is homogeneous throughout. Thus in order for a given monad to exist, it must be created with its modifications, that is, with the derivative forces, particular divisions and motions that it has in its body at each instant. “Primary matter alone cannot produce this, but primary matter imbued throughout with entelechies can.” (48). As Leibniz explains to De Volder in 1703, primary matter (or primitive passive force) “is related to the whole mass of the organic body”, and “the subordinate monads placed in the organs … combine with the primary monad to make the organic corporeal substance”. Thus to exist as a created substance, a monad is completed not only by its primary matter, but also by the subordinate substances that comprise its organic body (42). But if a complete created monad necessarily has an organic body, it is ipso facto a corporeal substance. Likewise, the subordinate monads combining to make its organic body will also be corporeal substances, not the purely immaterial, soul-like entities of the idealist interpretation. And from the fact that a body is an aggregate of independently existing corporeal substances (“corporeal substance phenomenalism”), it also follows that it is not merely a phenomenon produced in percipients as a result of agreements among their perceptions (“monadological phenomenalism”, 161ff.): the idealist interpretation must therefore be rejected.

As Phemister explains, the idealist reading takes off from Leibniz’s repeated claims that if God were to destroy all substances save one, he could do so in such a way that that substance would have all the same appetitions and perceptions as it would have if the rest of the universe still existed. But “since bodies require that a plurality of substances be aggregated together, a singular substance in a solipsistic universe would not have a body” (34). This suggests that the existence of a body is not necessary for the existence of perceptions, so that since each substance exists as if it were the only substance in the world, bodies must be mere results of the
relations that obtain among the perceptions of immaterial monads. But as Phemister points out, it is one thing to claim that God might have created a single substance in a solipsistic world with perceptions but no body, i.e. that solipsism is a logical possibility, or that on the evidence of any substance’s perceptions alone it is as if it were the only substance; and quite another to claim that, in the actual world God has created, substances have perceptions of other substances where there are no substances, or that it is metaphysically possible for a created substance to exist without a body. Indeed, Leibniz rejects solipsism by appealing to the Principle of Perfection, arguing that it would have been incompatible with God’s willing the good to create only one substance where he could have created more (and, indeed, infinitely more) (152-3). Thus while God could have created the same perceptions in us in a solipsistic world, we can take it as established that in the world he actually created there is a plurality of substances, and that we truly perceive this plurality. Indeed, there is a plurality of substances in any body however small, even if our senses are not adequate to discriminate their bodies. Our perceptions are confused not because bodies are “immaterial things misperceived as material objects” (153), but because we do not perceive distinctly all the parts into which any body is divided.

The corporeal substance interpretation throws light on other characteristic Leibnizian doctrines. As Phemister observes, if bodies are understood according to the idealist reading, as aggregates of disembodied “De Volder monads”, then they would be “incapable of comprising a continuum, whether discrete or continuous” (111). As aggregates of corporeal substances, by contrast, they form what she calls a “discrete continuum” (here she might have done better to use Samuel Levey’s more precise term, “contiguum”). The infinite nesting of aggregates of organic bodies of corporeal substances within each organic body then corresponds precisely to the doctrine of minute perceptions: we perceive all the divisions and motions in such an infinite aggregate, but we perceive them confusedly, in the sense that the confused perception of a larger organic body is composed from the minute perceptions of smaller organic bodies, most of which will be insensible (147).

Again, the corporeal substance view is able to make sense of Leibniz’s realism
about forces. On the idealist view, the derivative forces displayed by bodies, like the bodies themselves, "can be located only within the shared phenomenal content of the real immaterial perceivers" (194). On Phemister's reading, derivative forces can be regarded as modifications of the primitive forces of a corporeal substance, and thus modifications of the substance itself; but such modifications require the existence of the aggregate of corporeal substances that comprise the substance’s organic body (202). The derivative forces can therefore exist independently of being perceived just as much as the organic bodies that display them (194). On this view too, whatever the logical priority of active force, in the created world it must exist along with passive force, and both of these are manifested in the derivative forces. So there is a complete complementarity of the active and the passive which is the foundation of the pre-established harmony in several of its manifestations: the harmony between the perceptions and expressions of a substance and the motions and resistances of its organic body; that between the system of final causes and the system of efficient causes; and that between the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of nature (224). Also interesting and original is Phemister’s analysis in her final chapter of how freedom depends on passivity. Here she argues that “the very possibility of our acting freely requires both the infinity of confused and insensible perceptions that enter into even our most distinct perceptions, and the corresponding infinity of imperceptible appetitions and perceptible desires that enter into our self-conscious volitions” (251). Thus freedom itself depends, paradoxically, upon our possessing a degree of passivity or limitation. Nevertheless, the necessity of such “metaphysical evil” does not, she goes on to argue, preclude the possibility of free moral action.

But what about the many passages that appear to support the idealist interpretation, where Leibniz compares monads to souls, especially in canonical texts such as the *Monadology* and *The Principles of Nature and Grace*? Phemister attributes this to political pragmatics, quoting Leibniz’s approval of Bernoulli’s advice to "abstain from mentioning primary matter and substantial form" when discoursing with "Cartesians and the like" (15). As he also explained to Des Bosses, "in my French articles on the system of pre-established harmony among agents, I considered the soul
only as a spiritual substance, and not at the same time as the entelechy of the body, ... nor was anything else desired by the Cartesians” (16). To stress that a soul has primary matter or that it is the entelechy of a body would be to signify that the soul could not exist without its organic body, and thus to invite immediate dismissal by the Cartesian audiences he was trying to engage. Similarly, as he wrote to Remond in 1714, in writing in Leipzig journals Leibniz would “accommodate [him]self to the language of the School”, just as in others he would “accommodate [him]self rather to the style of the Cartesians” (16).

Phemister might have taken a similar line with Leibniz’s correspondence with Des Bosses, where the issue was adapting his philosophy to the views of the Jesuits. That is, she might have developed the idea that the “corporeal substances” Des Bosses was inviting Leibniz to accept were genuine unities of an enduring, spatially continuous bodily substance with its substantial form; in distinction from the corporeal substances of his monadic theory, where the organic body of a monad is real, but not a substance, since it does not stay the same for longer than an instant. This is not the tack Phemister takes, however. She maintains that the substantial chain that Leibniz entertains in the correspondence with Des Bosses does not essentially differ from the dominant monad described in the De Volder correspondence: each is described as a substance, consisting in “primitive active and passive force, from which arise the qualities and actions and passions of the composite which are discovered by the senses” (172). That is, on her view corporeal substances require real bodies, and “What is required for bodies to be real is continuous extension” (171). This, in turn, depends on Phemister’s interpretation of Leibniz’s solution to the problem of the continuum, according to which the determinate divisions introduced into primary matter by the entelechies of the subordinate monads within it do not prevent its constituting a "real extended continuum” (117). Thus it is that “the real work of unity is being done by the homogeneous primary matter that is common to all the monads involved in the corporeal substance, both the dominant monad and the subordinate monads in the organic body” (173). Many will find this attribution to Leibniz of a "real extended
continuum” highly problematic. Moreover, as Phemister frankly acknowledges, there are acute difficulties (she calls them “niggling”) in the claim that the unity of bodies is provided by primary matter. Still, whatever the difficulties in accounting for such unity, the Des Bosses correspondence suggests that even in his last months Leibniz had not given up his attempts to account for the reality of corporeal substances.

Phemister’s prose is clear, and her arguments are well presented, if often very complex. This complexity is not wholly avoidable; Leibniz’s views on substance (simple, composite, dominant, subordinate, immaterial, corporeal) are admittedly very intricate. Still, the complexity is aggravated, I believe, by her tendency to present so many of her arguments in terms of “De Volder monads”. As we saw above, Phemister had argued in opposition to Adams that, while there might be a logical priority of a monad conceived as a union of entelechy and primary matter, no monads can exist as created substances that do not have an organic body, so that “every actual De Volder monad is automatically and necessarily a corporeal substance” (44). Yet her arguments are peppered with references to “De Volder monads” as if they were actually existing monads distinct from corporeal substances: “The substances in bodies are not the De Volder monads alone” (111); “derivative force is a modification of the primitive active force of the dominant De Volder monad” (200); “There are no gaps in the continuous sequence of perceptions in the De Volder monad” (214). The explanation appears to be that this is a rhetorical device: allow that monads can exist as Adams conceives them (which explains how Phemister can characterize them as “immaterial De Volder monads” (162)), and then draw the consequence that they cannot after all be conceived in separation from their organic bodies. I think this is potentially misleading, insofar as it constantly gives the impression that there are two types of existing monads according to Leibniz, idealist De Volder monads and corporeal substances. But this is the view championed by those (like C. D. Broad and Dan Garber) who claim that Leibniz changed his interpretation of substance from an earlier corporeal substance realism to a mature monadological idealism, a view opposed by Phemister.

In connection with this last point, her presentation seems vulnerable, too, in not
taking into account any chronological development. In her introduction she simply declines to take such a developmental view, assuming that "a belief in the reality of body remains with Leibniz throughout his life" (3). This could be granted (with suitable exception being made to Leibniz’s various pronouncements about the unreality of body as the Cartesians construed it), without thereby granting that his mind-containing atoms of 1676 were identical to the living corporeal substances of his mature work (113), or that his introduction of the conservation of force in 1678 had no significance for his rehabilitation of substantial forms, or generally that his various attempts to account for the reality of bodies are all equivalent. That said, it would be harsh to criticize Phemister for not taking a developmental view, for the historical details necessary for such a presentation would have seriously detracted from the already daunting task she has undertaken here, that of arguing the case for the corporeal substance interpretation as a consistent reading of Leibniz’s whole system of thought.

Russell’s contrast in 1900 of the “fairy-tale Leibniz” of the *Monadology* with the wealth of deeper metaphysical and technical philosophy lying beneath the surface of his thought has had a huge impact on Leibniz scholarship. But in certain respects the way Leibniz's philosophy is taught to English-speaking undergraduates has not changed fundamentally since that time. His philosophy is still introduced primarily through the same texts, especially through the first part of the *Monadology*, at least in part because of the ease of fit of this text with the idealist interpretation, and of that interpretation with the philosophical canon: the idealist Leibniz can be portrayed as emending Descartes by jettisoning the material world, and then easily counterposed with the hard-headed realism of the empiricists. Phemister’s book is a defiant attempt to free Leibniz from the fetters of this misinterpretation, and her eloquent arguments will do much to turn the tide in favour of a more balanced assessment of his natural philosophy.