

## Leibniz and His Master

### *The Correspondence with Jakob Thomasius*

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In the spring of 1661, at the age of fourteen, Leibniz began his studies at the university in Leipzig where he came under the influence of Jakob Thomasius, a well-known German philosopher. Thomasius, who became the young man's mentor and adviser, was born in Leipzig in 1622, attended university there, and eventually became Professor of Rhetoric, Dialectic, and Moral Philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Before his death in 1684, he published in all the main areas of philosophy and directed dissertations on a wide range of topics. He was considered an "erudite" historian of philosophy, an important conciliator, and "a most recognized" philosopher (Sturm 1686: 72–3). Leibniz calls him "the most celebrated German Peripatetic" (A VI ii, 426) and refers to him as "our most famous Thomasius" (A VI i, 300). In April 1669, Leibniz wrote a letter to Thomasius in which he argues for the reconciliation of the Aristotelian and the mechanical philosophies, and for a conception of substance that would effect that reconciliation. He published the letter the next year, and it, thereby, became the young man's first public presentation of his newly developed theory of substance.<sup>2</sup> The title given to the letter is revealing: "Letter to a Man of the Most Refined Learning Concerning the Reconcilability of Aristotle and the Moderns." In the remainder of Leibniz's long life, he wrote thousands of letters to hundreds of people. Of all his correspondences, none is more important to an understanding of the sources and goals of his philosophical project than the one with his esteemed professor.

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Between September 1663 and January 1672, Leibniz and Thomasius exchanged sixteen letters, five of which were written by Thomasius.<sup>3</sup> The correspondence begins a few months after the defense of Leibniz's B.A. thesis, *De Principio Individui*, written under the tutelage of Thomasius, and weeks after the young man's seventeenth birthday. For the summer semester of 1663, Leibniz traveled to the nearby Lutheran university in Jena to study with Erhard Weigel (1625–99). The correspondence between Thomasius and Leibniz begins in September 1663, while Leibniz was living in Jena and just before he returned to Leipzig. It ends immediately before Leibniz leaves Germany for Paris in early 1672.

That Leibniz's correspondence with Thomasius is a thread that runs through radical changes in the young man's life is clear from the following facts. By January 1671, Leibniz and Thomasius had exchanged fourteen of the sixteen letters that would pass between them, and Leibniz's letter to Thomasius of January 1671 is the 37th in his extant philosophical correspondence. When Leibniz wrote his 11th (and final) letter to Thomasius a year later, it counted as the 100th in his philosophical correspondence. That is, between May 1671 and January 1672, the number of letters exchanged between Leibniz and other philosophers is greater than in all the preceding years of his life combined. Some of the most prominent contributors to seventeenth-century philosophy and science are included in this group: Spinoza, Otto von Guericke, Antoine Arnauld, Heinrich Oldenburg, Pierre de Carcavy, and Johann Comenius. Moreover, during the period of his epistolary exchange with Thomasius, the young philosopher managed to publish works in the areas of logic (*Dissertation on the Combinatorial Art* of 1666), jurisprudence (*An Example of Philosophical Questions Concerning Law* of 1664), theology (*Confession of Nature against the Atheists* of 1668), metaphysics (the letter to Thomasius, published in 1671), physics (*Theory of Abstract Motion* of 1671), and philosophical methodology (the entire preface to the text of Nizolio of 1671, which includes the letter to Thomasius of April 1669).<sup>4</sup> He also began a large theological project (the *Catholic Demonstrations*) and composed a number of short essays on the topics of mind, body, and activity, which were not published (see A VI ii, 276–303). Between 1668 and early 1672, Leibniz wrote a series of theological essays and several notes on natural law, in which he articulates for the first time many of his core metaphysical assumptions. On the basis of an examination of these writings, I have shown elsewhere that Leibniz developed (at least some of) the core features of his metaphysics much earlier than formerly thought and that he

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is committed to a philosophical methodology that has previously gone unnoticed (see Mercer 2001: ch. 1).

That the period of Leibniz's correspondence with Thomasiaus is enormously fertile is obvious. Leibniz begins the correspondence as an eager and precocious young student. The epistolary exchange ends just as his international reputation is developing, and just before he leaves for Paris where he will assure that reputation. What makes the correspondence between the student and his mentor so singularly significant, however, is that it bears witness both to the influence that Thomasiaus's own philosophical strategy had on the development of Leibniz's thought and to the young man's audacious divergence from his teacher. That is, we find here two features of Leibniz's philosophical personality that stand in tension with one another. On the one hand, Leibniz is conservative and cautious: He follows his mentor in proclaiming the virtues of the past great philosophers, especially Aristotle; he suggests that most philosophical truths are to be found in the texts of the ancients, when those are properly read; and he insists on a philosophy that will reconcile the old philosophy with the new and, thereby, effect intellectual peace. On the other hand, he is rebellious and innovative: He rejects a major part of what his professor has taught him, embraces views that his master "disdains," and sets out courageously on his own philosophical path. That these features of Leibniz's philosophical personality stand in tension with one another has created hardships for his interpreters. It has been difficult to reconcile the modern side of his thought (the contributions in physics, logic, and mathematics) with the apparently traditional side (the commitment to Christian doctrines and to ancient authors).<sup>5</sup> And this tension has helped to camouflage the genuine importance of Leibniz's early works. Because scholars have been eager to see the great man as thoroughly innovative, they have ignored the conservatism underlying his approach, a conservatism bequeathed to him by Thomasiaus.

But the neglect of Leibniz's conservatism has come at a high price. Consider Leibniz's (often quoted) description of his philosophical development in a letter to Remond of 1714:

After finishing the Ecoles Triviales I fell upon the moderns, and I recall walking in a grove on the outskirts of Leipzig called the Rosental, at the age of fifteen, and deliberating whether I should keep the substantial forms [*si je garderois les Formes Substantielles*]. Mechanism finally prevailed and led me to apply myself to mathematics. (GP III, 606/L 655)

Until recently, students of Leibniz have taken passages such as this to provide ample evidence of two things: his youthful rejection of the Aristotelian philosophy and anything else traditional, and his commitment to the physics of the mechanists (see, e.g., GP IV, 478/L 454).<sup>6</sup> For many scholars, the only question that remained was one of influence.<sup>7</sup> For others, Leibniz's early period is one of "uncertainties and reversals" (Wilson 1989: 45). A few interpreters have noted that Leibniz's early texts are strewn with references to Aristotle, but because of Leibniz's apparent abuse of key features of the ancient philosophy, these references have been considered rhetorical.<sup>8</sup>

In the past decade, however, some scholars have begun to place the young Leibniz in his proper intellectual context and have, therefore, begun to discern other aspects of his thought. Thanks to the work of Philip Beeley, Maria Rosa Antognazza, Ursula Goldenbaum, Richard Bodéüs, Detlef Döring, Hubertus Busche, and others, the full richness of Leibniz's early period has begun to emerge.<sup>9</sup> In my book, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (Mercer 2001), I show that the young Leibniz intended to borrow ideas from all the great philosophical schools in order to construct a true system that would effect intellectual peace, and that his grand metaphysics is the result of this recycling of philosophical doctrines.

In the present chapter, I offer a fuller analysis of the inherent tension between a commitment to the old and an endorsement of the new in the young Leibniz's thought. This tension is wonderfully apparent in the correspondence between Leibniz and his respected master. Based on a (brief) commentary on the Leibniz–Thomasius correspondence, we are able to discern a tension between the conservative and the innovative in two closely related ways. The first is that despite Leibniz's endorsement of the new mechanical physics, he remained unremittingly committed to the truth of past ideas. This commitment led him to find a way to embed his mechanical physics within ancient ideas. The second is that despite the conciliatory methodology that he inherited from Thomasius, he was prepared to depart from his esteemed mentor on behalf of the truth. Once we take seriously the philosophical lessons that Thomasius bequeathed to his student and once we see the development of the young Leibniz's ideas within this context, we are able both to identify these tensions and to witness Leibniz's successful attempt to resolve them. In the end, the correspondence with Thomasius offers important lessons about Leibniz's philosophical personality.

Before turning to the correspondence, it will be helpful to situate the philosophical discussion between the master and student in its proper context.

## 1. HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

In 1669, Leibniz prepared an edition of a text by the sixteenth-century humanist, Mario Nizolio, which he published in early 1670. Leibniz wrote a lengthy introduction to Nizolio's book, *On the True Principles and the True Method of Philosophy, Against the Pseudo-philosophers* (1553). Both Nizolio's text and Leibniz's introduction discuss the proper way of philosophizing. Leibniz attached to his introduction a slightly revised version of his April 1669 letter to Thomasius, which he entitled "Letter to a Man of the Most Refined Learning Concerning the Reconcilability of Aristotle and the Moderns [*recentioribus*]." By such means, Leibniz calls dramatic attention both to his admiration for Thomasius and to the strategy of reconciliation that he had learned from his erudite teacher. In order to discern the philosophical and methodological lessons of this and the other letters to Thomasius, our own learning requires a bit of refinement. The philosophical proposals of both Leibniz and his master are understood best within the following philosophical traditions.

### Humanism and Conciliatory Eclecticism

For our purposes, we may bypass the complications involved in describing humanism as a method and tradition and move directly to the humanist assumptions particularly relevant to Thomasius.<sup>10</sup> Many Renaissance and early modern humanists practiced and preached conciliatory eclecticism among the ancient schools, and some extended their eclectic scope to include more recent authors.<sup>11</sup> Here, the underlying assumption was that the classical texts offered a treasure trove of truths that contemporary philosophers could combine to form the true philosophy. According to many humanists, the diverse philosophical traditions were not as incompatible as they appeared at first. The goal was to forge a reconciliation among the worthy schools, the result was a mixture of ancient and modern ideas; and the hope was that the proper synthesis would effect peace among contemporary philosophers.

We can glean from Thomasius's many publications the methodological lessons that he taught his students.<sup>12</sup> Thomasius believed that the true philosophy could be constructed from the raw materials of apparently

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diverse philosophical schools, but he insisted that those raw materials be chosen with great care. Thomasius complained bitterly about the propensity among his predecessors and colleagues to collect ideas without thorough analysis, to assume that all philosophical schools could be made to cohere, and then to force a synthesis among doctrines where there was none. He believed that ancient philosophers offered the primary raw materials for the proper conciliatory philosophy, but he was prepared neither to force their ideas into Christian doctrine nor to accept the mistaken interpretations of their ideas promulgated by the less discriminating humanists. He saw the need to take the texts of classical authors on their own terms (see e.g., Thomasius 1693: 466, 478ff.). The result of this historically informed analysis of ancient philosophy was to make the “true” views of the ancients available for careful scrutiny. Once the ancient doctrines were properly interpreted, they could be thoroughly evaluated. For example, Thomasius’s *Exercitatio de Stoica mundi exustione* (1676) is an extended comparison of the tenets proposed by leading Stoics, Platonists, Aristotelians, and Epicureans.<sup>13</sup> In the process of identifying the heretical views and “many errors” of some of these past philosophers (especially the Stoics), Thomasius is eager both to identify and clarify those ancient doctrines that conform to Christian teachings. For Thomasius, the goal of proper historical analysis is to identify the real views of the ancient philosopher, to discriminate carefully between those views that are orthodox and those that are not, and then to construct the true philosophy. By such means, we will escape “the shadows of the pagans” and discover “the light of true doctrine” (1676: 3).

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#### Aristotelianism

In Thomasius’s opinion, the brightest light to be found among the ancient thinkers was that of Aristotle. Like so many humanist thinkers before him, Thomasius distinguished between Aristotle and his dim-witted followers and claimed that many of the “true” views of the ancients had been misunderstood (1658: 75).<sup>14</sup> Although Thomasius had no doubt about the superiority of Aristotelian philosophy, he subjected that philosophy to the same scrutiny that he applied to other ancient sources. He writes in his *Schediasma*, for example: “For those people who repeat the same old song that the ancient Aristotle can be reconciled with sacred scripture, they should be met with derision” (1665: 22 – see also 13). Although it was an arduous task to uncover Aristotle’s real views, Thomasius insists that the philosophy of Aristotle, once properly understood, had enormous

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merit (1658: 72–82). In his *Schediasma*, Thomasius claims that “there has been abundant pouring forth of divine wisdom” in ancient philosophy and that the profundity of the Aristotelian philosophy is due to the fact that Aristotle, more than any other philosopher, understood that “God speaks through the book of nature” (1665: 479). Although Thomasius admits that there is much wisdom to be found in Plato and in the other ancient philosophers who used their intellect to discern God in nature, he announced that it was Aristotle who had the greatest insight. In the preface to his textbook on physics, Thomasius proclaims that “God himself” may be revealed through “the study of nature” once we make proper use of the philosophy of Aristotle. He concludes his preface by writing that:

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there is the most elegant nexus among things and the finest order [which acts] as a ladder for us with which to ascend to God. This [Aristotelian order] [...] reveals the glory of the supreme Craftsman [...]. Assuredly, whoever glimpses the single harmony and beauty of ends will therefore grasp [...] the Wisdom of the most Benevolent Architect. (1670: preface [9])<sup>15</sup>

### Platonism

Thomasius also depended on the philosophy of Platonism to help him ascend the ladder to God and the ultimate truths. That is, despite his very definite Aristotelian leanings, Leibniz’s master was thoroughly conversant with the details of Platonism and quite sympathetic to Platonist tenets. At least since the time of Porphyry (232–304 CE), it was common for philosophers to turn to the Platonic tradition for inspiration concerning divine matters and to Aristotelianism for insight concerning the mundane. Thomasius is no exception. For example, in his *Exercitatio*, he discusses at length the views of Platonist philosophers on this topic, and he concludes that Platonism is extremely valuable. Because Renaissance Platonists “have wrapped that [Platonic] philosophy in mystery and obscurity” (1676: 478 – see 1665: 52) it is especially important to distinguish between Platonist tenets that are sound and those that are heretical. But in the end, Thomasius admits that the Platonic tradition is an important source of truths, especially about God’s relation to the created world (1665: 13; 28; and 249–52). He agrees with the Platonists against the Stoics in their account of “the flowing of creatures from God” (1665: 249–52). Although he accepts that the supreme being is “the fountain of features which flow into creatures” and although he agrees with Augustine that “God contains all things in himself,” he insists that this flowing or

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emanation be understood in the right way (ibid.). In brief, Thomasius is extremely knowledgeable about the whole history of Platonism, and he is keen to use that tradition once its orthodox tenets have been interpreted rightly.

### Reformed Philosophy

In his October 1668 letter to Leibniz, Thomasius accuses his former student of accepting the philosophical proposals of the Dutch Cartesian, Johannes de Raey. In his April 1669 letter to Thomasius, Leibniz calls himself “a reformed philosopher” and proudly announces the benefits of the reformed philosophy. In order to understand properly both Thomasius’s criticism of Leibniz’s proposals and the status of the proposals themselves, it will be helpful to display some of the features of reformed philosophy and to see De Raey’s thought in this context.

Due to the anti-Aristotelianism of Luther and the early reformers, the scholastic philosophy of northern universities went through a radical transformation in the second half of the sixteenth century. The place of Aristotelianism had just become stable again when, in the first half of the seventeenth century, the intellectuals of northern Europe were confronted with the new natural philosophies of Galileo, Descartes, and Gassendi. By the middle of the century there had evolved throughout Europe, and especially in the Protestant areas of the north, a group of eclectics whose members sometimes referred to themselves as the *reformers* [*reformatores*] and their philosophy as *reformed philosophy* [*philosophia reformatata* or *philosophia emendata*]. For Leibniz, any thinker who articulated a desire to accommodate the new mechanical physics within some version of Aristotelian metaphysics was a reformed philosopher.<sup>16</sup> Reformers had very different recipes for mixing the old with the new. Each was prepared to say that when the Aristotelian philosophy was properly understood, it could comfortably accommodate the mechanical philosophy. Thus, at the very time that philosophers such as Descartes and Gassendi were crying for the demise of the Aristotelian philosophy, others were calling for its transformation. The reformers maintained that the Aristotelian philosophy did not need to be rejected, it just needed to be reformed (see Verbeek 1992: 8–9 and Mercer 1993: 41–3).

Johannes de Raey (1622–1707) was a prominent philosopher at the university in Leiden. In his September 26/October 6, 1668 letter to Thomasius, Leibniz writes that in the same way that Thomasius had saved Aristotle “from the smoke of the Scholastics,” so De Raey in his

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*Clavis philosophiae naturalis Aristotelico-Cartesiana* (1654) “shows [...] that Aristotle conforms wonderfully to [the philosophy of] Galileo, Bacon, Gassendi, Hobbes, Descartes, and Digby” (A II i, 10).<sup>17</sup> For our purposes, the Dedicatory Letter of the *Clavis* is especially interesting. De Raey explains there that because the Europeans “lost the works of Aristotle” and because the scholastics promulgated false views about the ancient’s thought, the true meaning of Aristotle’s writings have been lost. The great importance of the Cartesian philosophy, claims De Raey, is that it reveals the true meaning of Aristotle’s principles. However incompatible modern mechanism and Aristotelian physics may seem, the incompatibility is only apparent, an unfortunate result of an historical accident. In order to discover the correspondence between the Cartesian and Aristotelian philosophies, all one has to do, De Raey suggests, is to penetrate through the layers of misinterpretations to the real philosophy of Aristotle. Not surprisingly, De Raey thinks that he has accomplished this task. De Raey’s method in the remainder of his book is to describe what “the schoolmen” say about a crucial element in Aristotle’s philosophy (e.g., substance, substantial form, matter), to quote Aristotle (rendered in Latin) on the topic, and then to explain what Aristotle really meant. Although many of De Raey’s interpretative conclusions seem far-fetched, he does manage to construe intelligently and then put to interesting use genuine elements of Aristotle’s metaphysics in an honest attempt to reconcile the ancient’s thought with Cartesian mechanism (see Verbeek 1992: 8 and 72).

## 2. THE EARLY CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN LEIBNIZ AND THOMASIVS, 1663–68

Between September 1663 and October 1668, six letters passed between Leibniz and Thomasius. One philosophical topic is dominant: mechanism as a means to explain the features of the corporeal world in a manner consistent with the Aristotelian philosophy, as Leibniz interpreted it.

### Leibniz’s Master

In the introductory section to this chapter, I presented some of Leibniz’s autobiographical remarks about his youthful development, and I noted a tension between his endorsement of the new mechanical philosophy and his commitment to a methodology of reconciliation. In section 1, I offered the appropriate historical context within which to see Leibniz’s correspondence with Thomasius. Before turning to the correspondence,

it will be helpful to consider comments about Leibniz's development and, thereby, to place his relation to Thomasius in its proper light. Consider Leibniz's description of the original impression made by "his master":

As soon as I arrived at the Academy, by a rare fortune I met, as a Master, the well known J. Thomasius who, although he did not accept my doubts and was very little disposed to let me do such a reform of the substantial, incorporeal forms of bodies, engaged me very strongly to read Aristotle, announcing to me that, when I would have read this great philosopher, I would have a wholly different opinion than that offered by his scholastic interpreters. I soon acknowledged the wisdom of this advice and saw that between Aristotle and the scholastics, there was the same difference as between a great man versed in the affairs of state and a monk dreaming in his cell. I therefore took of Aristotle's philosophy another idea than the common one. I did not accept all of his hypotheses, but I accepted them as principles. Aristotle seemed to me to admit, more or less like Democritus or, in my time, like Descartes and Gassendi, that there is no body which can be moved by itself. (Foucher de Careil 1905: 5-7)<sup>18</sup>

Leibniz followed Thomasius in returning to the philosophy of Aristotle so as to distinguish between the ancient himself and his more incompetent followers. He also agreed with his master that the teachings of ancient philosophers such as Aristotle had much more to offer contemporary thinkers than was often thought.

Nor did the lessons learned from Thomasius stop there. As we have seen, whether it was Aristotelianism, Platonism, or some other ancient philosophical tradition, the erudite historian encouraged his students to discriminate among interpretations of the ancient doctrines and to seek profound truths in classical texts. Consider another account that Leibniz offers of his youthful development. This time he is writing in the late 1670s and speaking of himself in the third person: "he fell first across the Ancients, in whom at the beginning he understood nothing, and then something, and at last as much as was needed [ . . . ]; he gained a sense not only of their language but of their thoughts." Unlike more recent thinkers whose works are full of "swollen words" and "patchworks of borrowed opinions," the thoughts of the ancients "stood out strenuous and commanding, and embraced as it were in a picture the whole field of human life; their diction was clear, natural, easy, and appropriate" (GP VII, 52).<sup>19</sup>

Following his master, Leibniz learned to find his own way in the ancient texts and to take ideas that were not entirely "common." But this tendency toward innovative thinking also led the precocious young man to disagree with his teacher on important points. In the end, the student

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did not accept the master's interpretation of substantial forms, and he was bold enough to make his own "reform" of this central notion. Thus, although it is true that Leibniz "despised the method of those who use only forms" to explain the features of nature and "was charmed by their [the mechanists'] beautiful ways of explaining nature mechanically," it does not follow that he rejected the whole of the Aristotelian philosophy. Rather, he chose the physical explanations offered by the mechanical philosophers over those offered by traditional scholastic philosophers. As a fifteen-year-old, when mechanism "prevailed" over scholastic substantial forms and he applied himself "to mathematics," the young man's commitment was to get to the bottom of the new mechanical physics.<sup>20</sup> But it is important to see Leibniz's endorsement of the new philosophy within the context of his conservative methodology: Following the methodological example of Thomasius, he considers the main proposals of the mechanists consistent with those of ancient philosophers such as Democritus: "Aristotle seemed to me to admit, more or less like Democritus or, in my time, like Descartes and Gassendi, that there is no body that can be moved by itself." For the young Leibniz, mechanical philosophers such as Descartes and Gassendi fall into the same philosophical camp as does Democritus, and, moreover, Aristotle agrees with them all concerning the movement of bodies. It was during the 1660s that Leibniz succeeded in forging a synthesis between Aristotelian metaphysics and mechanical physics. His letters to Thomasius indicate how and why he succeeded.

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Leibniz's Letter of September 1663 (A II i, N. 1)  
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In the summer semester of 1663, Leibniz went to Jena to study with Erhard Weigel who, unlike Thomasius, endorsed the ideas of the "new" philosophers.<sup>21</sup> While in Jena, Leibniz apparently became a member of an academic society, which was presided over by Weigel and which met weekly for discussion of old and new books (see Aiton 1985: 16).

The first letter in Leibniz's extant correspondence, and the first to Thomasius, was written toward the end of Leibniz's stay in Jena. Leibniz describes a disputation on a political topic (specifically, on natural rights), which he must have considered of interest to his master. As Professor of Moral Philosophy, Thomasius was often engaged with political and moral matters. He was familiar with the work of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and other "recent" thinkers.<sup>22</sup> In this letter of September 1663, Leibniz offers extremely brief observations on the political thought of Machiavelli,

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fact, this is the only text of the period in which Leibniz does not combine his mechanical approach to physics with ideas from ancient sources, especially from Aristotle. The letter reads very much like an exercise that the student prepared for his former master. It consists, in its twenty-six-line entirety, of a solution to a paradox first proposed by Anaxagoras. Leibniz begins with the hypothesis that color is only an idea in the mind and not a quality in things. He then uses this hypothesis, along with some Gassendian principles, to solve the paradox (A II i, 4–5). There would be reason to take this position as somehow representative if Leibniz continued to make important use of these same principles. He does not; and there is little reason to believe that Leibniz was particularly wedded to Gassendi's views on perception or to Gassendi's philosophy, for that matter. Another reason for not generalizing from this one instance is that in the same year Leibniz published his *Dissertation on the Combinatorial Art*. Because this work uses the Aristotelian account of cause, analyzes the four Aristotelian primary qualities in mechanical terms, and presents Aristotle's notion of the mean, there is little justification for thinking that Leibniz had given up combining ancient or historical ideas with modern ones in 1666. For us, however, the letter is noteworthy because it suggests that Leibniz hopes to interest Thomasius in the mechanical physics. Although we cannot be certain of Leibniz's intentions, he apparently has constructed a clever trap: Given Thomasius's vast familiarity with ancient thought (and hence with the paradox)<sup>24</sup> and given his thorough familiarity with ancient atomism, the presentation of Gassendi's version of Epicurean atomism as a solution to the problem would surely strike his fancy. That is, the young man seems to have wished to engage the elder philosopher with contemporary theories of perception. Thomasius did not take the bait.<sup>25</sup>

#### Leibniz's Letter of September 26/October 6, 1668 (A II i, N. 9)<sup>26</sup>

If Leibniz's intention was to entice Thomasius into a discussion about "new" ideas in general and the mechanical philosophy in particular, the fourth letter in the correspondence was a success. In this letter of September 26/October 6, Leibniz presents his original account of corporeal substance. In brief, he claims that (1) the prime matter of Aristotle is nothing but inert mass [moles] without motion and *figura*;<sup>27</sup> (2) the origin of motion is God; (3) *figura* results from the potentiality of matter; (4) this *figura* "is the source of all the affections or sensible qualities which maintain themselves as a result of the form of this thing"; (5) we

can call this “innermost *figura* of parts [*intima partium figura*]” *substantial form* because (a) it can be distinguished from matter, (b) it is prior to everything else concerning body, and (c) it is in terms of it that we explain all the appearances or qualities of the body (A II i, 11). According to Leibniz, his understanding of substantial form has one great benefit over the account of the scholastics. If “we admit in bodies” substantial forms or “quasi-spiritual beings” whose power is supposed to make the rock fall and the plant grow, then “we prevent ourselves from the most apt way of demonstrating [the existence of] God and throw away that excellent principle of Aristotle: that whatever is moved has the cause of motion outside itself, which itself climbs the ladder to the prime mover” (ibid.).

Leibniz’s rhetorical strategy here is clever. As the young man knew, his illustrious teacher was keen to argue that it was Aristotle (as opposed to Plato and other great ancient thinkers) who offered the most secure “ladder” with which to ascend from nature to God. Leibniz hopes to tempt Thomasius into reflecting on the mechanical philosophy by claiming that his own account of substantial form provides a better ladder and, hence, a more direct ascent. Leibniz argues as follows: there is nothing in body “other than matter and figure”; neither matter nor figure can act as the cause of the motion of body; therefore, “the cause of motion must be outside of body”; “there is nothing conceivable outside of body other than mind”; “mind without question is God.” That is, Leibniz attempts to use a mechanical notion of body as extended matter to ground his version of the cosmological argument. The argument itself is neither original nor (particularly) convincing. But it is interesting for what it reveals about Leibniz’s attempt to forge a synthesis between Aristotelian metaphysics and mechanical physics (see Bodéüs 1993: 58–70). Before we analyze Leibniz’s position in greater detail, it will be helpful to consider Thomasius’s response.

#### Thomasius’s Letter of October 1668 (A II i, N. 10)

Leibniz’s proposal elicited an immediate response from Thomasius. The most striking thing about Thomasius’s letter of October 1668, the fifth letter in the correspondence and the first by Thomasius, is that it reveals charmingly his quiet disdain for the young man’s mechanical leanings and, thereby, explains why he is not keen to engage with his former student on the topic. His attitude seems one of bemused resignation. Although he makes it perfectly clear that he “spurns” much of the new

philosophy (A II i, 13), he seems neither surprised that his precocious young friend has embraced it nor optimistic about dissuading the young man from the folly of his ways. Rather, the elder philosopher chides the younger: “excuse me, but you do not yet convince me” about the views of “Descartes and the other new philosophers” (A II i, 12). With what appears to be exasperation, he admits: “I make this protest to you, as I have been making them to others” (A II i, 13). Thomasius seems to understand the temptation that “this way of talking” has for eager young minds, but he continues to find it unhelpful and inaccurate. Thus, Leibniz’s master, despite his proclamations about the dangers of the new philosophy, was familiar with some of its representatives. He insists, for example, that the German Cartesian, Johann Clauberg, is clearer and “more pleasing” than Descartes. He is also quick to suspect that the proposals of his former student have been “suggested” by the “meditations” of Johannes de Raey, whose philosophical doctrines he knows “by report” from “the book sellers” and others (A II i, 12–13).

It is at this point in the correspondence that we glimpse some of the appeal that Thomasius must have had for the brilliant young Leibniz. The master offers two different kinds of criticisms of the position proposed by Leibniz. The criticism that dominates the letter is, explains Thomasius, “a question of history” (A II i, 13). Although he endorses fully Leibniz’s goal of intellectual harmony, he warns his former student: Before there can be “any hope of harmony [among the philosophical schools], [. . .] we need to examine a bit more fully the mind of the philosopher [i.e., Aristotle].” Thomasius points out that the substantial form cannot be identical to accidental things such as the figuration and magnitude of parts “in whose agreement you seem to construct the harmony” (A II i, 12). Although he acknowledges that he is “aware of this manner of talking” and admits that others may accept this way of making “peace” (A II i, 13), he seems appalled by the historical inaccuracy of Leibniz’s proposal. Perhaps not surprisingly, Thomasius then offers a rather lengthy history lesson in which he shows that the “new philosophers” have much more in common with Epicurus than with Aristotle. In the end, Thomasius disapproves of any attempt to forge a synthesis of the mechanical philosophy with Aristotelian tenets that requires such a radical departure from the thought of Aristotle himself. Part of Thomasius’s point seems to be that because no self-respecting Aristotelian will condone this “reform” of substantial form, there is little hope of forging genuine peace between Aristotelians and mechanists. Moreover, it also follows that because no self-respecting Aristotelian will admit that there is nothing in body “other

than matter and figure,” Leibniz’s argument for the existence of God begs the question and will not be taken seriously by any thoughtful student of Aristotle.

In the middle of the history lecture, Thomasius makes two astute philosophical points. First, in response to the idea that the form of the body is merely an organized arrangement of parts, Thomasius asks whether or not this applies to the human form. “Must we deny,” wonders Thomasius, “that the substance [of a human being] is distinct from its *figura*?” Although Thomasius does not develop his criticism, the suggestion is that there is more to the substantial form of a human being than the organized arrangement of its matter.

Thomasius’s second philosophical point is made in response to Leibniz’s claim that his mechanical conception of body offers a ladder with which to ascend to God. The master neatly shows the weakness in the young man’s position as presented in the letter. According to Leibniz, for any individual body, because we must go outside the body to explain its motion, it is supposed to follow that God exists as the source of motion. But, as Thomasius rightly points out, there is nothing in Leibniz’s position that blocks an infinite regress. Nor is that all. Thomasius is keen to note that because the young man has reformed the traditional account of substantial form, he has removed “the most beautiful ladder” by which Aristotle would have us ascend “to the prime mover.” In the end, insists Thomasius, we must revert to the proper understanding of a substantial form as “the principle of motion and rest” and, thereby, offer a firm account of motion without the threat of regress (A II i, 13 – see Bodéüs 1993: 75–96).

Leibniz’s attempt to attract the attention of the former master was successful. But his mechanical rendition of the cosmological argument in the letter of October 1668 failed miserably as a means to enlist Thomasius’ support. In the end, Thomasius’s dislike of the new philosophy was not diminished, and his fears about the new tendency to “reform” Aristotle’s thought very likely were increased. Perhaps it is not surprising that he does not engage with the young man in any detail again on these topics. It seems likely, nonetheless, that his criticisms encouraged Leibniz to rethink his views. As we will see, already in 1668–69, the young man’s attempt to place a mechanical physics within an Aristotelian metaphysics becomes more clearly conceived. And by 1670, he has changed his notion of substance to accommodate the sorts of criticisms leveled by Thomasius.

Before concluding this discussion, it is worth noting a more personal feature of the letter. From what Thomasius writes, it is clear that Leibniz

has recommended his former teacher to his employer, and, moreover, that Thomasius has been asked to send Boineburg some of his philosophical works. "I am sending," explains Thomasius, "the most illustrious Baron" those treatises and disputations that are readily available. Thomasius hopes that Leibniz has not "deceived" this great "patron of letters" either about Thomasius' "achievements" or about "the excellence" of his writings (A II i, 12). It seems clear that the young man has recommended his former master and, thereby, tried to bring him into the range of Boineburg's influence. There is something strikingly generous about this. When this generosity is set next to Leibniz's attempt to convince Thomasius of the mechanical philosophy, it is reasonable to suppose that the young man yearned to include his former master in his own intellectual voyage and to share the wealth of its success.

### The Early Correspondence Between Leibniz and Thomasius in Its Wider Context

That Thomasius considered Leibniz's philosophical proposal in his letter of October 1668 an utter failure seems clear. But the energetic young man was not discouraged, and it is now time to consider exactly why he was prepared to go so far beyond the teachings of his master. In order to evaluate Leibniz's proposals in the correspondence of 1663–68, we need to examine more thoroughly exactly what motivated the young man to reject the metaphysical foundations of mechanism and how he intended to place a mechanical physics on Aristotelian foundations.

From the beginning of his philosophical evolution, Leibniz intended to reform the Aristotelian notion of substantial form and, thereby, to create an Aristotelian notion of substance that could comfortably accommodate the mechanical physics. Leibniz's reform involved the rejection of the traditional role of substantial form in the explanation of corporeal phenomena. Roughly speaking, for the scholastics, the substantial forms of bodies possessed innate powers that inclined those bodies to behave in characteristic ways: Fire, for example, contained the innate power to heat and to rise whereas rocks possessed the tendency to fall. The youthful Leibniz rejected this explanatory model, and he replaced it with a mechanical one. Between the time of Leibniz's conversion to mechanical physics (about 1661) and the commencement of the *Catholic Demonstrations* in 1668, the young man attempted to discover the common denominator among the mechanical options of philosophers such as Gassendi, Hobbes, and Descartes. By the time Leibniz wrote to Thomasius in 1668,

he had accomplished that task. For Leibniz, the mechanical position reduces to the following: There is some sort of matter or extended stuff [*res extensa*], which is (somehow) moved and whose arrangements both cause and explain the corporeal features of individual bodies; therefore, a body is organized *res extensa* and all corporeal features are reducible to the arrangements of such extended stuff.<sup>28</sup> What struck Leibniz as right about the mechanical philosophy was the idea that the corporeal features of natural bodies were to be explained in terms of matter and motion, so that there was no need here for “mysterious” innate tendencies. Whether it was the shape of the shoe or the heat of a fire, the standard mechanist insisted that corporeal features were reducible to (some form of) *res extensa* and motion.

But Leibniz differed from his contemporary mechanists in his rejection of the metaphysical foundations on which the mechanical explanations of corporeal phenomena were supposed to rest. Indeed, Leibniz *never* seems to have been satisfied with the metaphysics offered by the prominent proponents of the mechanical physics. One of his main goals in the mid-1660s was to reform the metaphysics of Aristotle to provide a stable foundation for the mechanical physics.<sup>29</sup> By 1668, he had managed to reduce the mechanical notion of body to the status of prime matter, which he could then combine with his “reformed” theory of substantial form so as to construct a properly self-sufficient account of substance.

For help in deciphering the deep motivation behind Leibniz’s reformation of the Aristotelian philosophy, let’s turn to another text of 1668, the *Confession of Nature against the Atheists*. In this essay, which is the first one written as part of the *Catholic Demonstrations*, Leibniz displays his underlying dissatisfaction with the mechanical philosophy. He explains that although the causes [*rationes*] of the ancients had referred either “to the Creator or some kind (I know not what) of incorporeal forms,” the mechanists had discovered that “the causes [*rationes*] of most things can be given in terms of the figure and motion of bodies, as it were mechanically” (A VI i, 489). Leibniz accepts this explanation of corporeal features. The disagreement that he has with the mechanists is in the inference they draw from this explanation. Before adequately considering the metaphysical foundations of their mechanical explanations, these philosophers proclaimed that natural reason offered no evidence of anything incorporeal (either of God or the soul) so that one had to find evidence for the incorporeal elsewhere. But, Leibniz asks: “what if I should demonstrate that the origin of these very primary qualities themselves cannot be found in the nature of body? Then, indeed, I hope that these naturalists will admit

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that body is not self-sufficient and cannot subsist without an incorporeal principle” (A VI i, 490).<sup>30</sup>

Of course, Leibniz is confused about what the mechanists’ position actually is. Although they do think that all corporeal features are explainable in terms of the fundamental features of body (they differ about what these are) without recourse to anything incorporeal, they do not believe that the fundamental features are themselves derivable wholly from the nature of body [*res extensa*] taken by itself.<sup>31</sup> Leibniz’s mistaken interpretation of the mechanists rests on one of his most fundamental assumptions. Because the mechanists designate magnitude, figure, and motion as the fundamental features of body and because they take body to be extended stuff, Leibniz assumes that they must also believe that the cause and explanation of these features lie in the nature of body. He finds it unfathomable that someone would assign to an object fundamental features that themselves do not follow from the nature of the object. According to Leibniz, if the “origin of these very primary qualities themselves cannot be found in the nature of body,” then “body is not self-sufficient” (A VI i, 490). The underlying assumption here is that bodies are supposed to be self-sufficient entities that offer the cause and explanation of their features.

In a related essay of the *Catholic Demonstrations*, Leibniz explains exactly how bodies come to be self-sufficient. In *On Transubstantiation*, which was written almost certainly after the September 26/October 6, 1668 letter, he writes:

1. Substance is a being that subsists per se. 2. Being that subsists per se is one that has a principle of action in se [ . . . ]. 3. Whatever has a principle of action within itself, if it is a body, has a principle of motion within itself [ . . . ]. 4. No Body apart from a concurrent mind has a principle of action in se. This has been demonstrated in Part I of the *Catholic Demonstrations* [that is, the *Confession of Nature against the Atheists*], where the existence of God is proved. 5. Therefore no body taken apart from the concurring mind is a Substance. (A VI i, 508–9)

Here the assumption is that to be substantial is to be self-sufficient, and, moreover, to be self-sufficient is to have a principle of activity. That substance is essentially what acts and, hence, is what has its own principle of activity is a view from which Leibniz never wavers. By such means *On Transubstantiation* goes beyond what was said in the *Confession of Nature* and explains exactly why corporeal nature needs an incorporeal principle: bodies cannot “subsist without an incorporeal principle” because it is



explained by the arrangement of their parts, it follows that the *figura* is that in terms of which we explain all the features of bodies (point (5c)).

By insisting on the self-sufficiency of substance in his theological essays, Leibniz offers a response both to the historical and to the philosophical criticisms leveled against him by Thomasius in the letter of October 1668. Considering the historical criticism, namely, that Leibniz's reinterpretation of substantial form was based on a misunderstanding of Aristotle, we can now see that Leibniz's reformation of the Aristotelian notion is not quite as inept as it first seemed. According to Leibniz, God acts as the incorporeal principle in nature: this active principle combines with purely passive matter and, thereby, creates with it an organized corporeal nature. From this perspective, it does not seem so far-fetched to call *figura* "substantial form." Even though God acts as its principle of activity, the *figura* does constitute the innermost nature of body (point (5)) and the source of its affections (point (4)). In other words, although the *figura* does not have the *causal* priority and self-sufficiency that Aristotle requires of substantial form, it has some of the other characteristics that Aristotle attributes to this fundamental principle. For example, *figura* so understood constitutes the nature of bodies and the source of its features. In this case, body has its own essence: it is essentially *this* organized arrangement of parts, this matter in motion.

Nor is Leibniz's rendition of the cosmological argument quite as bad as it seemed originally. Whether his position has developed in response to Thomasius's criticism or was inadequately explained in the September 26/October 6, 1668 letter, by insisting on the self-sufficiency and activity of substance in *On Transubstantiation*, Leibniz offers a response to the criticism leveled against him. According to Thomasius, when Leibniz removes the cause of the motion of a body from inside the body to something outside it, he, thereby, opened himself up to a regress problem. But Leibniz's more developed position contains a response to this criticism: Once we understand that God is supposed to act as the principle of activity which, along with matter, creates the substantial nature of a body, there will be no regress of causes.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Leibniz's position in *On Transubstantiation* includes a response to Thomasius's worry about the absence of a human substance in the *figura* of a person. In the essay, the young man distinguishes between human substances and all other sorts in that the former have their own mind. "Substance is union with mind," explains Leibniz. "Thus the substance of a human body is union with the human mind; and the substance of bodies which lack reason is union with the universal mind, or God" (A VI i, 508/E 116). There can

be little doubt that Leibniz's position is becoming more subtle at least partly in response to the criticisms of his master.

### 3. LEIBNIZ'S LETTER OF APRIL 1669 (A II i, N. 11)

In the epistolary exchange with Thomasius, the letter of April 1669 is by far the most interesting.<sup>33</sup> Its argument is long, obscure, and important. For our purposes here, a very brief summary will have to suffice. Three features of the letter are particularly relevant. The first is personal. It begins with grand claims about Thomasius's erudition and insight, makes congratulatory comments about a recent publication, and suggests that it is the duty of Thomasius to forge philosophical peace. The most extraordinary thing about this part of the letter is that the young man attributes to the elder some of his own insights about how to effect such intellectual peace.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, this is slightly odd: Leibniz seems committed to taking Thomasius with him on his philosophical journey. On the other hand, the young man's attitude is exceedingly generous: he appears to want to credit his former master with some of his own insights. He writes, for example: "it will be play for you, but fruitful for the public" to warn "our unseasoned youth" of the dangers of the new philosophy and the benefits of the old (A II i, 14–15). Although Thomasius does not do this in any systematic fashion in any of his publications, Leibniz performs this twofold task in the remainder of this letter.

The second important feature of the letter is methodological. Leibniz makes it perfectly clear that he is a conciliatory eclectic who intends to forge a philosophy of peace out of Aristotelian metaphysics and mechanical physics. In the process of making this point, he offers a fascinating glimpse of the contemporary philosophical and methodological terrain and indicates where on the proposed map he stands. He insists "that it is wrong to give our renovators [*novatores*] credit either for everything or for nothing." The best way to correct the wrongs of the new philosophers is to follow in the footsteps of his master and turn to the history of philosophy so as to grasp "profound reasons for the interconnections among doctrines" (A II i, 14/L 93).

Concerning his own place on the contemporary philosophical map, Leibniz reveals precisely where he stands. Although he is "anything but a Cartesian," he does "maintain the rule that is common to all these innovators [*restauratores*] of philosophy, [namely that] nothing ought to be explained in bodies except through magnitude, figure, and motion." However, he approves "of more things in Aristotle's books on physics

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than in the meditations of Descartes; so far am I from being a Cartesian” (ibid.). Leibniz makes it clear that he is not interested in the metaphysical underpinnings that the mechanists offer for their philosophy (and the various debates surrounding them) but only in mechanical explanations of corporeal features. Moreover, he is an enthusiastic reformer and believes that Aristotle’s physics can be permitted without violating the reformed philosophy. He goes on to explain a bit more about his attitude toward the philosophy of Aristotle: “For the most part, Aristotle’s reasoning about matter, form, privation, nature, place, infinity, time and motion is certain and demonstrated [ . . . ]. Who would disagree, for instance, with his theory of substantial form as that by which the substance of one body differs from that of another? Nothing is truer than his view of primary matter.” He continues: “The one question is whether Aristotle’s abstract theories of matter, form, and change should be explained by magnitude, figure, and motion. This is what the scholastics deny and the reformers [*reformatores*] affirm. The latter opinion seems to me to be not only the truer but also the more in agreement with Aristotle” (A II i, 15/L 94). Besides the *recentiores* (all of whom accept the stated rule), there is a group of *reformatores* who propose to explain Aristotle’s most basic physical principles in terms consistent with mechanism. Those principles, as interpreted by the scholastics, cannot be so explained. The pressing question is, therefore, whether the scholastics or the reformers are correct in their interpretation of Aristotle’s physical principles. Leibniz thinks that a reformed philosophy can be constructed that would fully “explain” the relevant principles and that such a philosophy would be more in agreement with Aristotle than are the opinions of the scholastics. Leibniz also suggests that were this reformed philosophy to explain successfully Aristotle’s abstract theories of matter, form, and change in terms of magnitude, figure, and motion, then most philosophers would accept the resulting Aristotelian views about (say) prime matter. After all, these views would be a synthesis of Aristotelian and mechanical principles and would appeal to the modern philosophers and to the Aristotelians, or so Leibniz seems to believe.

Having clarified his general methodological strategy, Leibniz spends the remainder of the April 1669 letter arguing for his own version of the reformed philosophy. He introduces the conclusion for which he will argue by asserting that, as a variety of philosophers have noted, the scholastics perverted Aristotle’s meaning in metaphysics, logic, and law. Leibniz proposes to demonstrate that the schoolmen did this in physics as well. In other words, he will argue that the reformers and not the



of Aristotle's philosophy, once that philosophy is properly understood; and (3) that even if the physical explanations of corporeal phenomena offered by both the scholastics and reformers were "possible," the former would have to be rejected because of its lesser intelligibility and because (as he goes on to say) of the "manifest truth" of the reformed philosophy. A final point to note about Leibniz's strategy here is that although the discussion is presently focused on physical explanations, it is ultimately about the metaphysical foundations of physics. Leibniz asserts that "the views of the moderns" about physics "flow from Aristotelian principles," that is, from the basic constituents of Aristotelian metaphysics.

Having stated the conclusion for which he will argue and outlined his argumentative strategy, Leibniz turns his attention to the proof that the reformers and not the scholastics are correct about Aristotle's physics. He writes: "I cannot better show this [ . . . ] than by asking for any principle of Aristotle which cannot be explained by magnitude, figure, and motion" (A VI ii, 435-6/L 95). He then proceeds to treat Aristotle's principles of matter, form, and change in turn. In each case, he takes one of these fundamental principles and transforms Aristotle's original notion into a mechanistic one.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, the crux of this reformation is his account of substantial form. Returning to the position of his September 26/October 6, 1668 letter, he explains that the substantial form of a body is its *figura*, which is an "organized arrangement of parts" of matter produced by motion. He happily concludes that "there is obviously almost nothing in Aristotle's physics which cannot be readily explained and made clear through the reformed philosophy" (A-II i, 18/L 97).

Thus far, Leibniz points out, he has only shown that "these positions can be reconciled; it still remains to show that they ought to be." But Leibniz's present task is not a very difficult one. The first part of his demonstration virtually accomplishes it: Because Leibniz has mechanized Aristotle's basic principles of matter, form, and change and because Aristotle's fundamental principles are the origins or sources of everything else in nature, the position shared by the reformers and moderns (namely, that all corporeal phenomena can be explained by matter in motion) will follow from those principles. Leibniz explains:

For what does Aristotle discuss, in the eight books of the *Physics*, besides figure, magnitude, motion, place, and time? If the nature of body in general can be explained in terms of these, a particular body must be explained in terms of a particular figure, a particular magnitude, etc. In fact, he himself says in the *Physics*, Book iii, Section 24, that all natural science concerns magnitude (with

which figure is, of course, associated), motion, and time [. . .]. Everything in nature must therefore be explained through these (A II i, 19/L 98).

By so neatly mechanizing the Aristotelian principles, he has shown that the physical explanations proposed by both the moderns and the reformers really do follow from Aristotelian principles. He concludes: “the Aristotelian Philosophy has been reconciled to the Reformed Philosophy” (A II i, 21/L 100).<sup>36</sup>

Leibniz is not yet satisfied. He now turns his attention to the final part of his demonstration and attempts to show “the manifest truth of the Reformed philosophy itself.” He maintains that nothing is needed to explain the phenomena of the world besides magnitude, figure, and motion. As a response to Thomasius, this is a very clever strategy because he had learned his respect for nominalism from the master himself.<sup>37</sup> The young man now proposes to the elder philosopher: “there are no entities in the world except mind, space, matter, and motion and therefore that the hypotheses of those recent thinkers [*recentiores*], who use only these to explain phenomena, are the better ones. For it is a defect in hypotheses to assume what is unnecessary. For truly all things in the whole world can be explained by these things alone.” By such means, Leibniz has shown not only that the reformers interpret Aristotle’s physics more properly than do the “uncultured” scholastics, but also that they accept the insights of the nominalists. The materials are in place to formulate the “truth per se” (A II ii, 21–2 /L 100).

In the remainder of his letter to Thomasius, Leibniz presents a theory of substance that is supposed to constitute the foundations of the proper reformed philosophy.<sup>38</sup> The conception of substance presented in the April 1669 letter to Thomasius includes an account of prime matter, substantial form, and their relation. There is insufficient space for details here, but suffice it to say that Leibniz offers a slightly more complete account of the position outlined in his letter of September 26/October 6, 1668.<sup>39</sup> Given our concerns, perhaps the most striking aspect of Leibniz’s account is that the young man ignores the warnings of his master and insists throughout that he is following the teachings of Aristotle. He writes, for example: “Aristotle seems nowhere to have imagined any substantial forms which would themselves be the cause of motion in bodies [. . .]. Therefore, it is not absurd that of the substantial forms only [divine] mind should be designated as the first principle of motion” (A II i, 20/L 99).

Nor is Leibniz’s claim here entirely outlandish. He constructs an account of corporeal substance that is appropriately self-sufficient and

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properly Aristotelian by demoting *res extensa* to a mere constituent of substance and by distinguishing between a primary form and the form or *figura* in an individual substance. For Leibniz, prime matter is extended stuff that functions as the potential principle and, thereby, plays exactly the same *role* as Aristotle's matter: It is that "from which all things are made" (A VI ii, 435/L 96). Although *res extensa* is not a substance by itself, Leibniz has neatly made it the passive element in substance: when *res extensa* is joined with the primary form that functions as its principle of activity, it becomes a constituent of a self-sufficient corporeal substance. Like the Aristotelian notion, Leibniz's matter is indeterminate and must be made into an individual thing by its substantial form. As Leibniz writes: "For [divine] mind supplies motion to matter. Matter is devoid of motion per se. Mind is the principle of all motion, as Aristotle rightly saw" (A II i, 20/L 99). It is significant that the individual substance here is composed of indeterminate matter and a determining form (namely, God) and that, once this "organized arrangement of parts" of matter (A II i, 17/L 96) or "secondary form" is created, it is itself a principle of motion. God may cause (and sustain) the organization of the parts of the substance, but once those parts are so organized, the secondary form is able to act as a cause of motion both in itself and in another body. If we understand this secondary form to be the arrangement or organization of primary matter, then it has some of the features of the Aristotelian notion: It constitutes the nature of the substance and the cause and explanation of its essential features. Although it remains perfectly clear that much of what Leibniz says about matter and (secondary) form in this letter is inconsistent with anything the ancient accepted, these unAristotelian elements fit neatly within a theory of substance that has the structure of Aristotle's. For example, although God is the principle and cause of individuation and matter has a well-defined nature, the fact that they combine as active and passive elements to form a union that constitutes the cause and explanation for substantial properties is recognizably Aristotelian. With admirable finesse, Leibniz has situated a version of mechanical physics on an Aristotelian foundation.

#### 4. THE LATER CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN LEIBNIZ AND THOMASIVS, 1669–72

Between May 1669 and January 1672, ten letters passed between Thomasius and Leibniz. Given our concerns here, only two of these deserve sustained comment.

## Thomasius's Letter of May 1669 (A II i, N. 12)

It is not surprising, perhaps, that Thomasius was rendered virtually speechless by Leibniz's letter of April 1669. He had informed his former student only a few months previously that he was prepared to take seriously neither the young man's reformulation of fundamental parts of Aristotelian metaphysics nor the mechanical physics that the reformulation was supposed to accommodate. In reaction to Thomasius's considered opinion, Leibniz composed an extended response that began with grand pronouncements of his former master's erudition and insight and ended with a lengthy argument for a position only slightly more subtle than the one that the elder philosopher had recently rejected.

In his response to Leibniz's very long letter, Thomasius seems both flattered and perplexed. On the one hand, he is "charmed" by the letter and even moved by its argument to reconsider his views: "For although the things that you discussed as I read them did not wholly drive out my earlier impression, they nevertheless seemed to cause it to totter and to prepare me substantially either for discarding my opinion or perhaps for uniting it with yours in some way." On the other, the elder professor is inclined "to stay respectfully silent." He explains that he does not have the requisite skills in "the mathematical sciences" to argue with the gifted young man, nor does he have the time to rise to "the same level" as Leibniz occupies in these matters. That is, he possesses neither the expertise necessary to respond adequately nor the free time to acquire the requisite knowledge. With what appears to be genuine kindness, he acknowledges that unlike his young friend who is prepared to "go into battle" for the sake of these matters, he is immersed in intellectual tasks that leave him neither the time nor the energy to take up the challenge. With striking honesty, Thomasius writes: "you are more fortunate than I [...] for your most flourishing period of life [*vernantissima aetas*]" comes at a time when such a "battle" can be fought "to the finish." Having come of age in the difficult aftermath of the Thirty Years War, Thomasius admits: "on the other hand, all my youth was spent in those remnants of the savage age out of which I was able to rise up little by little, in whatever manner, to whatever kind of success of cultured knowledge." Given his limited knowledge and the limitations of his time, the elder philosopher proposes that they "strike a bargain": if he can find some "quiet time for thinking," then he will respond to Leibniz (A II i, 25). Otherwise, the suggestion is, Leibniz should not again waste his energy, however abundant it may be.<sup>40</sup>

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Letters of Congratulation: September 1669–December 1672  
(A II i, Ns. 13; 14; 17; 29; 30; 35; 37; 50; and 100)

Leibniz never again attempts to engage his former master on the topic of the reformation of the Aristotelian philosophy. In September 1669, Leibniz writes to Thomasius announcing the preparation of the edition of the text by Mario Nizolio. He describes some of the goals of the undertaking and asks for Thomasius's advice. In his reply of December, which is the ninth letter of their correspondence, Thomasius proclaims that he "loves" the project and offers some words of wisdom (e.g., he defends the scholastics in their use of technical language). He is particularly pleased that one of the main goals of the project is to discuss "the true method [*ratio*] of philosophizing" (A II i, 27).

In the letters that exchange hands between April 1670 and January 1672, other congratulatory comments were made. In his letter of October 11/21, 1670, Thomasius praises Leibniz for the success of his edition of Nizolio's book (A II i, 67). In his letter of December 1670, Leibniz applauds Thomasius's new book on physics, namely, *Physica, Perpetuo dialogo* (1670).<sup>41</sup> In the letter of January 1671, Thomasius acknowledges the good reception of the young man's *Schediasma*, that is, the two-part work in physics published in 1671 and entitled *New Physical Hypothesis* and *Theory of Abstract Motion* (A II i, 75). Both the master and his illustrious former student seem to be committed to maintain a friendly communication, despite the very obvious divergence of philosophical paths. Thomasius incites difficulties, however, when in his letter of 11/21 October 1670, he claims that he will be "thankful" and not "displeased" if "you will demonstrate to me my errors," that is, the errors in Thomasius's new *Physica, Perpetuo dialogo* (A II i, 67).

## Leibniz's Letter of December 1670 (A II i, N. 35)

Leibniz's first response to Thomasius's *Physica* is important. Although in their epistolary exchange thus far, the ancient philosopher most cited is Aristotle, Leibniz feels that it is appropriate here to bring in Plato. As noted in section 1, Thomasius himself was thoroughly acquainted with the history of Platonism. I have argued elsewhere that Thomasius bequeathed to his student a similar erudition and that Leibniz's conception of God and the relation between God and the world develops out of this tradition. I also have argued that it was in late 1670 and early 1671 that Leibniz begins to develop his theory of preestablished harmony that

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has its roots in this Platonism and that rejects the reality of passive matter. As I have shown, in an attempt to make created substances entirely self-sufficient, Leibniz gave each non-human substance its own mind or principle of activity. "For truly the instrument of God is Mind, unified with God by which means God acts on bodies other than by creating." Moreover, explains Leibniz, individual minds act "constantly by a special reason [*ratio*]" (A VI i, 533-4). Given the present analysis of the correspondence with Thomasius, it seems likely that Leibniz was motivated to develop his theory of preestablished harmony at least partly in response to the criticisms leveled by his master.<sup>42</sup>

It is significant, therefore, that in the final days of 1670, Leibniz wrote a letter to Thomasius in which he discusses the philosophy of Plato, the nature of mind, and the importance of final causes. In the letter, the young man compares his illustrious teacher to Plato and displays some of his own most basic beliefs about the place of mind in nature. Leibniz proclaims that Thomasius and Plato share a goal and method. In the same grand way that Plato helped his contemporaries escape "from the shadows" of materialism by introducing them to final causes, so Thomasius has encouraged his contemporaries to avoid the dangers of that false philosophy by reminding them of the importance of such causes in physics. As Leibniz sees it, Plato had the courage to reject the views of his materialist predecessors and to turn instead to the "truly rational causes [*rationes*] of things, that is, the ends." Where Democritus and some of his contemporaries mistakenly made matter the cause [*ratio*] of things, Plato correctly saw that there were "two principles, mind and matter." Similarly, because Leibniz's contemporaries rely too heavily on geometry "which lacks any reference to a final cause" and because in general "the cause [*ratio*] of the recent physics [. . .] [is] the material causes of things," Thomasius struggles to return philosophy to its proper objects (A II i, 73). Leibniz encourages his teacher to follow Plato's lead and prove the usefulness of mind to philosophy in general and to physics in particular.

There is little doubt that Leibniz is sincere in his approbation of Thomasius. The master had bequeathed to his student a conception of the created world as an elaborately interconnected and divinely harmonized whole, in which the supreme being is immanent.<sup>43</sup> Consistent with this idea, Leibniz writes in the December letter that God arranges things from the beginning and thereby "emanates in his work so arranged." In his letter to Leibniz of October 1668, Thomasius had himself compared Plato's account of "the ideas of things" with Aristotle's view of substantial

form (A II i, 13). But when Leibniz insists that philosophers must reclaim minds and final causes, he is prepared to exceed the pronouncements of his teacher in significant ways. I have argued elsewhere that, by December 1670, Leibniz is willing to reduce everything to the activity of mind-like substances whose behavior has been harmoniously arranged (see Mercer 2001: chs. 8–9). As he explains to Thomasius, the thinking of individual or “secondary” minds “comes from the first mind, i.e., from God” who “on account of his wisdom, has arranged things from the beginning” so that “all things follow as if by a certain necessity toward the greatest harmony of all things.” Leibniz explains that because of his discovery about the relation between primary and secondary minds, “I came to think of motion as the unique universal [cause] of all the phenomena in whose appearances we perceive many and marvelous things” (A II i, 73–4).

Leibniz’s letter of December 1670 is neither as long nor as complicated as the one of April 1669, but it must have surprised Thomasius almost as much. Like the earlier letter, it begins with grand proclamations about Thomasius’s erudition and insight, makes congratulatory comments about a new publication, and then goes well beyond anything claimed explicitly by the author of the *Physica*. Moreover, Leibniz’s views themselves have evolved since the earlier presentation, at least partly in response to Thomasius’s comments. It is perhaps not surprising – though it is a disappointment – that Thomasius does not engage with Leibniz’s proposals.

What he does, however, is to wonder aloud in his response of January 1671 as to whether or not the aether in his *Physica* has something in common with the aether assumed in Leibniz’s *Schediasma* (A II i, 75). In May 1671, Leibniz responds eagerly to this question about the possible similarity between their notions. In this, the thirteenth letter of their correspondence, Leibniz writes: “To me, my [account of] aether seems to differ neither from the Aristotelian one, nor greatly from your own” (A II i, 96). As he goes on to explain, the hypotheses of his *Schediasma* are consistent with those of Copernicus and Tycho and are wonderfully able to offer the cause [*ratio*] of the miracles of nature” (ibid.). Although Thomasius was probably amused at Leibniz’s attempt to be the great conciliator, the young man may have tried his master’s patience when he went on to announce: “to such a degree that you now consider” things from the largest perspective, is it not true that “it is possible to save all the phenomena of bodies by means of only magnitude, figure and motion, without the other qualities?” (ibid.).

Thomasius did not respond, and Leibniz wrote the final letter of their correspondence in January 1672, just before his departure for Paris. In the letter, the young man explains to his former master that he will soon travel to Paris for an extended stay. Thomasius would live another twelve years, would continue to publish well-received books, and would oversee a wide array of dissertations. Leibniz would continue to speak well of Thomasius and refer to his many books,<sup>44</sup> but they would never engage directly again.

## 5. CONCLUSION: LEIBNIZ, THOMASIUS, AND THEIR INNOVATIVE CONSERVATISM

The correspondence between Leibniz and Thomasius was neither long-lived nor argumentatively intense. But when situated in its proper historical context, it reveals a good deal about the sources and goals of Leibniz's philosophical project, and it offers important insight into a curious tension at the heart of Leibniz's philosophical personality. Like his master, the student valued erudition and engaged in thoughtful reconstruction of ancient philosophies. Like the older philosopher, the young man intended to forge a synthesis of the major philosophical schools while remaining consistent with Lutheran doctrine. But contrary to Thomasius, Leibniz was prepared to embrace the new physics in an attempt to construct the true philosophy. Partly as a result, the young man's synthesis – unlike that of his master – is one of the most innovative philosophies in the history of philosophy. What the correspondence with Thomasius reveals is that Leibniz's striking innovation was the result of a methodology of reconciliation. One of the overlooked aspects of Leibniz's brilliance is his success in building such an original and sublime philosophical edifice out of recycled materials.

But the correspondence with Thomasius also reveals the generosity and intellectual honesty at the core of Leibniz's personality. I have argued elsewhere that Leibniz practices a "rhetoric of attraction," according to which he attempts to engage the sectarian reader by using agreeable philosophical terminology and by extolling the virtues of the reader's sect while attracting attention to the benefits of other philosophical schools. Ultimately, the goal of this rhetoric is to entice the reader to consider certain underlying assumptions, which Leibniz considers to be true and which he thinks will eventually lead the reader to philosophical enlightenment and intellectual peace (see Mercer 2001: ch. 1).<sup>45</sup> In the correspondence with Thomasius, we witness the original use of this rhetoric of

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attraction as well as the underlying generosity that (partly) motivates it. That Leibniz wanted to *include* Thomasius in his philosophical journey is clear. Once Leibniz hit on “the truth” of the new philosophy, he was eager to persuade Thomasius of its value, and he attempted to do so in terms that would appeal to his elder. Although, ultimately, Leibniz failed to enlist Thomasius, his struggle to engage him on his own terms tells us a great deal about Leibniz’s underlying concerns. He intended to construct a true philosophy out of the materials of the past, and he hoped to convince everyone of its rightness. His loyalty to Thomasius is touching, as is his charmingly naïve desire to carry his master along in the wake of his own intellectual achievements. Leibniz’s patience and magnanimity toward his former teacher reveal a genuine kindness that is more difficult to glimpse in the heady activities of his later life. In the end, we are left thinking that Leibniz was a decent person, who cared deeply for his master but even more deeply for the truth.

#### Notes

1. It is odd that there has been so little written on Thomasius. Besides the fact that he trained Leibniz and was the father of Christian Thomasius, Guhrauer (the first great biographer of Leibniz) claimed that Thomasius had begun “the scientific study of the history of philosophy in Germany” (1842: 27–8) – see also Leinsle 1988: passim and Mercer 2001: passim. By far the most important work done on Thomasius is that of Bodéüs 1993, whose work on the correspondence between Leibniz and Thomasius is very helpful.
2. In earlier works, such as *Dissertation on the Combinatorial Art* Leibniz had discussed metaphysical topics and offered some suggestions about the proper elements of metaphysics (see A VI i, 17off), but the published letter to Thomasius constitutes his first attempt to offer a fully articulated and original theory of substance.
3. The letters by Leibniz are A II i, Ns. 1; 3; 8; 9; 11; 13; 17; 29; 35; 50; and 100. Those by Thomasius are Ns. 10; 12; 14; 30; and 35.
4. It is noteworthy that Leibniz managed to publish so much in these early years and published so little in the remaining decades.
5. Bertrand Russell famously reconciled these by attributing to Leibniz an underlying dishonesty (1937, vi).
6. For standard responses to Leibniz’s decision, see Kabitz 1909: 50–1, and Brown, S. 1984: 30. The latter has maintained that Aristotelianism and mechanism confronted Leibniz “as stark alternatives.”
7. Concerning Hobbes’s influence, see Bernstein 1980 and Beeley 1996a: passim. For the influence of Gassendi, see Kabitz 1909: 50–1; Moll 1978–96: passim; Brown S. 1984: 31; and Hannequin 1908: ch. 1. For recent discussion of the influence of Bisterfeld, see Antognazza 1999 and 2001. Each of these commentators has presented a plausible story for the primary influence of

one of these authors. Before we can properly evaluate the contribution of any single philosopher on the development of Leibniz's thought, we need to understand his underlying concern to borrow ideas strewn throughout the history of philosophy and to turn those ideas into a conciliatory synthesis. For citation to other literature, see Mercer 2001: passim.

8. See especially Moll 1978–96: vols. 1–2; Loemker 1973; Hochstetter 1966; Belaval 1962: ch. 2; and Foucher de Careil 1905: ch. 1.
9. See, e.g., Beeley 1996; Antoganazza 1999 and 2001; Goldenbaum 1999; Bodéüs 1993; Döring 1996; and Busche 1997.
10. For a recent collection of essays on humanism and for citations to previous literature, see Kraye 1996.
11. I use the somewhat vague designation “conciliatory eclecticism” to refer to any eclecticism that attempts to combine the views of some group of apparently incompatible philosophies into a coherent system. It is not terminology used by Renaissance and early modern thinkers and so it is free of complicating connotations.
12. My discussion is based primarily on Thomasius's *Origines historicae philosophiae & ecclesiasticae* (1699); *Exercitatio de Stoica mundi exustione* (1676); and *Dissertationes LXIII & varii argumenti magnam partem ad historiam & ecclesiasticam pertinentes* (1693). For a more thorough discussion of these and other texts, see Mercer 2001: passim.
13. The full title of the work is *Exercitatio de Stoica mundi exustione: cui accesserunt argumenti varii, sed inprimis ad historiam Stoicae philosophiae facientes, dissertationes XXI*.
14. As many humanists had done before him, he argued that the bad translations of Averroes and the misinterpretations of the scholastics had made the excavation of the real Aristotelian philosophy especially difficult.
15. Preface pages are not numbered in the original.
16. It is important to be clear about the fact that some of the thinkers whom Leibniz called reformers and whom I discuss here did not use the term itself.
17. Nor was Leibniz unusual in his reaction to the *Clavis* – see, e.g., the contemporary of Leibniz, Johann Christoph Sturm, who considers De Raey to be “most learned” and the doctrines of his *Clavis* “most acute” (1686: 75–6).
18. This passage is found among the notes that Foucher de Careil collected, published, and subsequently lost. According to Foucher de Careil, the passage cited here was written during the 1660s.
19. The remainder of this passage is interesting: Leibniz compares the ancients to the moderns about whom he felt “disgust” and says that what he learned from the ancients, as opposed to the moderns, was “always to seek for clearness in words” (GP VII, 52). The picture he paints is rather different from those found in the later accounts of his development or even in the letter to Arnauld of 1671 (A II i, 169–81). The lesson here is important: We should not take any one of the various (and often inconsistent) accounts he gives of his philosophical development too seriously. When describing his intellectual history, as he does in the letters to Remond and in the *New System* of 1695, Leibniz often paints in broad strokes. The point of these stories is not so much to present the actual steps in his intellectual autobiography as

to give his reasons for accepting some philosophical doctrines and rejecting others. It is a mistake then to base one's history of Leibniz's philosophical development entirely on such accounts, as many commentators have done.

20. In the mid-seventeenth century, there were other German philosophers who attempted to combine the new mechanical philosophy with the thought of Aristotle – see especially Johannes Clauberg, *Disputationes Physicae* (1664) and Johann C. Sturm, *Philosophia Eclectica* (1686). For a brief discussion of Clauberg and Sturm and for citation to other literature, see Mercer 2001: passim.
21. For Weigel's views, see especially his *Analysis Aristotelica ex Euclide Restituta* (1658). The degree to which he influenced the young Leibniz's ideas about logic has been much discussed – see Moll 1978–96; Leinsle 1988; Mercer 1999 and 2001: passim.
22. See Thomasius 1693: passim. On Hobbes, see *Dissertatio XIX*.
23. Scholars of the period have made much of this letter. For a discussion of this point and for citation to the literature, see Mercer 2001: ch. 1.
24. Bodéüs does a wonderful job of tracking down the various references in the correspondence between Thomasius and Leibniz. For his helpful notes on this letter and on the topic of black snow, see Bodéüs 1993: 46–7.
25. We know that Thomasius and Leibniz remained on very friendly terms and, e.g., that Thomasius congratulated Leibniz on his promotion to doctor of jurisprudence in Altdorf in 1667 – see Bodéüs 1993: 11.
26. The third letter of their correspondence, written by Leibniz on September 19/29, 1668, describes a political issue involving Boineburg and contains nothing of any philosophical significance – see A II i, N. 8; and Bodéüs 1993: 51–2.
27. The Latin term *figura* has at least two rather different senses. It can mean, on the one hand, either form, shape, or figure and, on the other, nature, kind, or species. Because Leibniz here takes the nature of a body to be an arrangement of parts of matter, *figura* here is most appropriately understood as *arrangement* or *organization*. That this is what Leibniz has in mind will become clear in what follows. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to stay as close to Leibniz's original meaning as possible and not to translate the Latin *figura*. For more on this point, see Mercer 2001: 91.
28. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I will use the neutral term *feature* when talking about the qualities, accidents, affections, or properties of corporeal things.
29. Although the overriding goal of the project was to solve some of the most intractable theological problems (e.g., incarnation, resurrection, transubstantiation) in a manner acceptable to Catholics and Lutherans, Leibniz intended to solve these problems by the careful construction of the true metaphysics. For more on this, see Mercer 2001, especially ch. 2.
30. In fact, the proposals of the mechanical philosophers differ greatly and it is difficult to summarize accurately their basic assumptions. Leibniz's discussion here is based on an over-simplification of their views, but it is one that I will follow in presenting his argument.

31. Although Descartes and Gassendi have very different accounts of motion with respect to God's agency, they both assume that God is required to account for the motion of body, and, in this sense, they deny that motion comes from the nature of body itself. Descartes maintains that God "preserves motion in matter," whereas Gassendi thinks that God infuses motion into atoms at their creation. Descartes and Gassendi are perfectly happy to let God be the cause of the motion of bodies and see no problem in the fact that the full account of motion does not rest in the nature of body. For Descartes's views about motion, see especially Part II, §§37ff. of the *Principia philosophiae* (AT VIII A 62ff./CSM I, 240ff.). Like his ancient predecessors, Democritus and Epicurus, Gassendi takes motion to be intrinsic to matter, but unlike them he thought God put motion into atoms. He writes: "It may be supposed that individual atoms received from God [ . . . ] the requisite force for moving, and for imparting motions to others [ . . . ]. All this to the degree that he foresaw what would be necessary for every purpose he had destined them for" (Gassendi 1972: 400–1).
32. It is unclear when the *Confession of Nature* was written in 1668. But part of that text seems like a well-crafted response to Thomasius's criticism. Leibniz writes: "But if they say that this body is being moved by another body contiguous to it and in motion, and this again by another, and so on without end, by no more have they presented the *ratio* why the first and second and third and any one whatever is moved as long as they do not present the *ratio* as to why the following one is moved and why all the antecedent ones are moved. For the *ratio* of a conclusion is not fully given as long as the *ratio* of the argument is not given [*Ratio enim conclusionis tam diu plane reddita non est, quamdiu reddita non est ratio rationis*], especially because the same doubt remains in the case without end" (A VI i, 491).
33. This discussion is taken from Mercer 2001: ch. 3. For citations to the other literature written on the letter, see that source and Bodéüs 1993.
34. For a more thorough discussion of this part of the letter, see Mercer 2001: 110–14 and Bodéüs 1993: 117–21.
35. Prime matter becomes continuous mass [*massa*] "which fills the world while all things are at rest" and "from which all things are produced by motion and into which they are reduced through rest." As such, the "essence of matter or the very nature [*forma*] of corporeity consists in antitypy or impenetrability" (A VI ii, 435).
36. See Kabitz 1909: 59–63 and Bodéüs 1993: 117–210.
37. For more on Leibniz's views about nominalism, see A VI ii, 428–9/L 128.
38. This part of the letter is so obscure and Leibniz's views so difficult to make out that commentators have taken Leibniz's conception to be a version of mechanism merely translated into Aristotelian terminology. For further discussion of this point, and citations to other literature, see Mercer 2001: ch. 3.
39. Concerning substantial form, Leibniz again maintains that God, by acting on matter through motion, creates what there is in the world. He adds: "Forms must necessarily arise from motion [ . . . ]. For, the division [of prime matter] comes from motion, the boundaries of the parts [*termini partium*] come from division, their *figuræ* come from the boundaries of parts, and

forms from *figurae*; therefore forms come from *figurae* [ . . . ]. [Thus] forms arise from the potential of matter, not by producing something new, [ . . . ]. causing boundaries through the division of parts” (A II i, 17/L 96).

40. In 1669, Thomasius became Rector of the university, and his life must have been extremely busy – see Bodéüs 1993: 11.
41. For more details on this and related matters in these letters, see Bodéüs 1993: passim.
42. For more about the development of this important theory as well as Leibniz’s mental monism, see Mercer 2001: chs. 4 and 6–8.
43. For a discussion of Thomasius’s Platonism, see Mercer 2001: ch. 5, section 8.
44. See, e.g., A VI iv, 436 and 678. Leibniz praises Thomasius in the *Theodicy* and continues to do so until the very end of his long life, e.g., in the letter to Bourguet of 1714: GP III, 563 – see Bodéüs 1993: 7–29.
45. The rhetoric of attraction contradicts a view held by Leibniz scholars from Bertrand Russell to Robert Adams, namely, that Leibniz practiced a kind of philosophical Machiavellianism. As I see it, the correspondence with Thomasius confirms the underlying honesty of Leibniz’s character.