
Reviewed by Gerd Fritz (University of Giessen)

Readers of JHP might wonder why a book with writings by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) should be reviewed in this journal. The main reasons are: (i) controversies are a family of forms of communication which make a highly rewarding object of study for historical pragmatics, (ii) Leibniz was one of the most prolific writers (of his age) of contributions to controversies (e.g. the famous Leibniz/Clarke controversy 1715/1716, his controversy with Newton, and many others), and (iii) in many of his writings, Leibniz reflected on the theory of controversy.

Controversies are an attractive topic for historical pragmatics because polemical communications frequently show a characteristic pragmatic structure, where the opponents seem to follow certain fairly well-defined rules and principles and where they also often explicitly mention such rules and principles and reflect on them. This is especially true of controversies in the “Golden Age” of controversies, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. These contemporary reflections provide a valuable aid to the analysis of forms of controversy, as they afford us useful background knowledge concerning prevalent common-sense theories of controversy. Some authors of the early modern period can in fact be seen to have quite explicit and coherent theories of controversy, among them Jakob Thomasius, one of Leibniz’s teachers at Leipzig University, and Leibniz himself. Some of the rules and principles guiding early modern controversies and the text types generated by such pragmatic principles tend to change over time, due to the influence of new media, general changes in the culture of communication and other factors. Taking into account the nature of these pragmatic structures and their developments and also the availability of a wealth of data, it is not surprising that in recent years there has been a surge of interest in the history of this form of communication (cf. Dascal 1989; Bach 1997; Gloning 1999; Fritz 2003; Goldenbaum 2004; Bremer 2005; Dieckmann 2005; Gloning 2005).

The book under review consists of a substantial introductory essay by Marcelo Dascal, one of the foremost scholars of Leibniz studies, and 45 chapters, each
presenting one or more short writings by Leibniz, which are translated, many of them for the first time, from Latin, French or German into English, each of them provided with a short introduction and further scholarly notes. To this are added biographical notes on the most important authors mentioned in Leibniz’s texts, a wealth of references, a subject index, and a name index.

In his introductory essay, Dascal aims to demonstrate that there is an aspect of Leibniz’s work and especially of his view of rationality which has so far been systematically neglected, i.e. Leibniz’s emphasis on a “softer mode of proceeding (blandior tractandi ratio)” (p. 133) in the construction of knowledge, “a rationality that comprises more than calculative-demonstrative rationality alone” (Introduction, p. lxvi) and of which the use of dialogue as an important tool forms an essential part. In this alternative picture of Leibniz’s epistemology, the methods of logical or mathematical proof are supplemented with the method of “weighing the arguments”, a method which Leibniz describes metaphorically as the use of the “balance of reason” (p. 20f). The role of dialogue in this conception is characterised as follows: “The growth of knowledge, he [Leibniz] believed, required the cooperation of many minds […]. Such cooperation would be best served by infusing it with a critical spirit that values the confrontation of opposed positions, not for the doubtful pleasure of winning, but for its potential contribution to advancing knowledge” (Introduction, p. xxi). As controversies play such a fundamental role in Leibniz’s epistemology and as, furthermore, “Leibniz’s political thought is infused with the belief that politics must incorporate rational debate at its core” (Introduction, p. lv), it is not surprising that he should have given much thought to this instrument of knowledge acquisition and of political negotiation in various writings and also in his correspondence. In some cases his analyses of the form of controversies are directly related to one of the most pressing political problems of the time, “the great Western schism” (p. 248) between Catholicism and Protestantism (e.g. the memorandum contained in Chapter 27).

Whereas earlier editors of Leibniz’s logical and methodological manuscripts “favored a selection centered on the more formal writings” or did not place relevant texts under the heading of philosophical writings, as in the case of the authoritative “Akademie-Ausgabe”, the present volume foregrounds the “more dialectical and less formal aspects of Leibniz’s method” (Introduction, xxi).

Dascal begins his introductory essay by presenting the historical background which explains the rise in interest in negotiations, dialogue, tolerance, and the peaceful solution of controversies in the second half of the seventeenth century, i.e. the religious and political conflicts that had led to the Thirty Years’ War and to later wars of this age. He especially emphasises Leibniz’s interest in and commitment to the problem of the reunification of the Christian churches. He then surveys the intellectual sources that provided Leibniz with the materials for
the development of an “art of controversies”, e.g. the contemporary (and earlier) practice and theory of disputation, contemporary juridical logic, and both traditional and modern tools of dialectic and rhetoric. There follows an overview of the components of this art and the principles and techniques characteristic of this art. Dascal draws attention to the fact that there is no single Leibnizian text that expounds the various components of this art, but that elements of this art can be found scattered in the many writings from different periods of Leibniz’s life which are collected in this volume. Finally, he demonstrates the significance of the art of controversy for Leibniz’s entire philosophical stance, from theology and law to epistemology and science. By showing how Leibniz reflected on different forms of polemical exchanges, the rules and basic structures of controversies, strategies, tactics and tools of resolution, this well-structured and highly instructive essay contributes essentially to our knowledge of Leibniz’s views on the pragmatic form of controversies.

It is impossible in a short review to do justice to the richness and the scholarly scope of this book. I shall therefore confine myself to mentioning a few aspects of Leibniz’s views on controversies which seem particularly relevant to an analysis of controversies within the framework of historical pragmatics. The starting point of many of Leibniz’s reflections is a problem well-known to present-day participants and theoreticians of controversies: how can controversies be successfully resolved so as not to continue endlessly or to degenerate into fruitless polemics? Leibniz seeks to answer this question by analysing the basic dialectical structures of controversies, the communication principles that should be followed, strategies and tactics for successful debate, and tools and procedures for the resolution of conflicts. In the following I shall give a few examples of these aspects of controversy as dealt with by Leibniz.

In a Latin paper written in about 1683–1686, Leibniz starts developing what he calls a “method of disputing until the completion of the subject matter” (“methodus disputandi usque ad exhaustionem materiae” in Latin and “Kunst außzudisputiren” in the German subtitle). His aim is to ensure “that no party can say anything that is not at least pertinent to the matter at hand or that has already been affirmed or refuted. The same method serves in every deliberation, in replying in judicial proceedings, in terminating philosophical or theological controversies, and, in general, wherever many things are said in a misleading way” (p. 156). Leibniz here “attempts to provide a formal structure in which all the possibilities of moves in the discussion of a given issue can be exhaustively represented” (Dascal, p. 155). Starting from the initial argument (Latin Argumentum), a discussion may proceed with one or more objections (Latin Exceptio), which may be countered with one or more repartees (Latin Replica), to which again one may respond by one or more retorts (Latin Duplica). Leibniz presents this structure in a tree-like
A well-known procedure for finding out principles of communication for controversies consists in looking for ways in which debates can go wrong. This method is used by Leibniz in his early paper printed in Chapter 1 “Vices of mingled disputes” (“Vitia disputationis confusaneae” in the Latin original). After systematically examining various ways of conducting a dispute (e.g. written vs. oral controversies) and indicating the drawbacks of each of them, Leibniz suggests a model where disputes are guided by a “director” and where certain rules are respected: “It is possible to submit them (i.e. the disputes, GF) to firm and solid rules, so that [one may proceed] as quickly as in other matters, and avoid every doubt without the danger of being mistaken, without omitting or repeating anything, without there being a reason without a response nor a response without its reply [if it is so admitted], without shifting to another [theme] before concluding the preceding one, without anything being said without proof, and nothing being concluded except formally” (p. 5). Most of these dialectical principles are also known from other contemporary sources, e.g. from treatises on the form of disputations or from individual remarks of authors in the course of actual controversies, but it is worth noting that Leibniz endorses them as a part of a systematic framework for conducting debates successfully. Other principles discussed or at least mentioned concern the avoidance of certain moves like hiding or weakening the adversary’s arguments when one reports them, simulating having presented reasons (without in fact having done so), making digressions, using “harsh and scandalous expressions” etc. (p. 204ff). And, not surprisingly for a seventeenth-century text, politeness principles also come into play, which Leibniz himself visibly follows in his contributions to controversies (e.g. in his letter to Pellisson, p. 315).

In addition to these dialectical and rhetorical principles, Leibniz also discusses other general principles which pertain to an ethics of argumentation, e.g. the principle of moderation (Chapter 19) or the principle of putting oneself in the other’s place (“la place d’autrui” in Leibniz’s French original). The latter principle, much discussed in contemporary sources, is dealt with in Chapter 17. This short piece focuses on the ability to view things from the point of view of the other, the application of which can, as Leibniz shows, be justified both on strategical and on moral grounds (cf. Dascal 1995). Leibniz points out that taking the perspective of the other and thereby anticipating his possible moves can provide strategic advantages, but that this practice also follows from a basic principle of Christian morality, the so-called Golden Rule that you should not do to another what you would
not have him do unto you. Furthermore, putting oneself in the place of the other is a fundamental hermeneutical procedure by which we can improve our understanding of the other person.

Matters of tactics and strategy are discussed in many places. Interesting examples are to be found in Chapter 16, where Leibniz discusses the strategy of calling into question arguments individually which taken together provide strong support (magna probatio) for a thesis (“the sophism of division”) (p. 145) or a strategy for quickly defeating an adversary: “… one should bring to the fore false expressions, more those that are ridicule than those that are to be purged […]; and finally a packed succession of questions relevant to the matter at hand” (p. 146).

One of the main problems in the theory and practice of controversy is the question of the resolution and closure of disputes (cf. Engelhardt/Caplan 1987). This is also a topic to which Leibniz gave much thought. As he stresses again and again, endless disputes can be a grave danger both to scientific progress and to political stability. Discussions tend to be ineffective if there is no regulated form and no one to enforce the rules. In this connection Leibniz raises the question who is to be “the judge of controversies” (e.g. Chapter 2, p. 8). Since Leibniz is a rationalist, his basic answer to this question is that reason should be the final judge of controversies. However, as reason does not always naturally prevail, Leibniz on various occasions reflects on how to institutionalise a decision procedure, from “the calculation or computation (as Hobbes calls it) of reasons” (p. 21) to the casting of lots (p. 17) or the majority of votes and finally to an external authority endowed with the power to decide (p. 58f). A related attempt consists in defining an institutionalised role for the guiding of controversies. His first suggestion in this respect is very close to the traditional practice in disputations. The disputation of two opponents is guided by a director or president (Latin praeses) whose task it is to survey the course of the controversy and to guarantee orderly conduct and adherence to the rules, thereby ensuring a rational outcome (pp 3–5). In a later piece (Chapter 19) Leibniz introduced a more sophisticated third-person role, the expounder (French rapporteur). The tasks of the rapporteur comprise correctly defining the core of the controversy, the status controversiae, impartially presenting the positions of the opposing parties, “summarizing the disputes as much as possible, so that one can see all their economy”, and maintaining “a certain indisputable order which will bear the clarity of evidence” (p. 207). Finally, Leibniz also discusses various strategies for handling the solution of controversies, e.g. the tolerance model and the consensus model (controversiae conciliatio per tolerantiam and per consensum, p. 413), the latter being “a dynamic process that re-conceptualizes the issue, thus overcoming the deadlock” (Introduction, p. xlviii).

To sum up, this book is an impressive scholarly achievement and an indispensable tool for understanding Leibniz’s thinking on form and function of
controversies. It presents a judicious selection of texts in translations that are reliable and readable, while preserving the flavour and terminological peculiarities of Leibniz’s original texts. The editor’s introduction alone is a major contribution to Leibniz research and to the history of the theory of controversy. For readers interested in seventeenth-century philosophical thought, it is a reliable guide to “the unknown Leibniz”. For readers with a special interest in the historical pragmatics of controversies, it provides impressive evidence of the scope and sophistication of Leibniz’s theory of controversy and his views on the role of controversy in the “republic of letters” (res publica literaria). For anyone working on early modern controversies or theory of argumentation, Leibniz’s texts provide valuable first-hand data, and reading these texts opens our eyes to the background and the subtleties of contemporary forms of controversy.

References

Reviewer’s address

Institut für Germanistik
Justus-Liebig-Universität
Otto-Behaghel-Str. 10 B
35394 Gießen
Germany

gerd.fritz@germanistik.uni-giessen.de

About the reviewer

Gerd Fritz is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Gießen, Germany, formerly at the University of Tübingen, Germany. His current research interests include the pragmatics of text and dialogue, especially the structure and dynamics of scientific controversies, text comprehensibility and usability of hypertexts, and historical semantics. Among his major publications are: Kohärenz. Grundfragen der linguistischen Kommunikationsanalyse (1982), Handbuch der Dialoganalyse (co-edited, 1994); Historical Dialogue Analysis (co-edited, 1999), Einführung in die historische Semantik (2005).