

Articoli/1

The Debate on Plastic Natures in the Correspondence between Masham and Leibniz

Epistolary Exchanges as an Intellectual Framework in the *République des Lettres*

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In the early years of the eighteenth century, Jean Le Clerc and Pierre Bayle engaged in a fervent dispute regarding Ralph Cudworth's notion of plastic natures. This article examines how this debate indirectly prompted the beginning of the philosophical correspondence between Damaris Masham, Cudworth's daughter, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Through this epistolary dialogue, Masham's acumen is manifest, as she not only impels Leibniz to furnish a comprehensive and analytically rigorous exposition of his doctrine of pre-established harmony but also adeptly defends her father's intellectual system against Bayle's charges of atheism. The correspondence is valuable not only for its philosophical content, but also because it offers an example of how ideas circulate in the *République des Lettres*. In this supranational intellectual community, emblematic of the early modern epoch, epistolary exchanges function as pivotal conduits, bridging the realms of private discourse and public intellectual exchange.

Introduction

In 1678, Ralph Cudworth (1617-1688) published a significant work in London titled *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. As indicated in the subtitle, the volume seeks to refute «all the reason and philosophy of atheism» and demonstrate its «impossibility»¹. In the first chapter, Cudworth presents ancient atomism as a defective representation of the system of the universe, linking it with atheistic tendencies, as it upholds the doctrine of «the fatal necessity of all humane actions and events»². In the subsequent chapters, he systematically examines various forms of atheism, dismantling their foundational arguments.

¹ R. Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe*, London 1678, Frontispiece.

² *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. I, p. 2.

Central to his refutation is the introduction of the concept of *plastic nature*, a crucial element in his vision of a perfectly ordered universe. This universe, as Cudworth contends, is neither governed by blind necessity nor dependent on constant miraculous intervention by God. He articulates his position as follows:

[...] since neither all things are produced fortuitously, or by the unguided mechanism of matter, nor God himself may reasonably be thought to do all things immediately and miraculously; it may well be concluded, that there is a *plastic nature* under him, which, as an inferior and subordinate instrument, doth drudgingly execute that part of his Providence, which consists in the regular and orderly motion of matter; yet so as that there is also, besides this, a higher Providence to be acknowledged, which, presiding over it, doth often supply the defects of it, and sometimes over-rule it; forasmuch as this *plastic nature* cannot act *electively*, nor *with discretion*³.

Cudworth's concept of *plastic nature* is described as «incorporeal»⁴ and as possessing a «vital energy, without clear and express συναισθησις, *con-sense* and *consciousness*, *animadversion*, *attention*, or *self-perception*»⁵. As such, this energy does not equate to thinking activity, since, as he specifies, a «clear and express consciousness is supposed to be included in *cogitation*»⁶. In this respect, Cudworth's concept of plastic nature expressly diverges from the Cartesian soul, characterized as *res cogitans*, whose thinking activity is always accompanied by consciousness⁷. Rather, plastic nature is described as an «instrument of Deity»⁸, responsible for ensuring the operation of physical laws in the universe. While it acts upon bodies by imparting motion and preserving the same quantity of motion, its essential action extends beyond mere «local motion»⁹. Additionally, plastic nature contributes to «the formation of plants, animals, and other things», aligning with and reflecting the harmonious structure of the universe¹⁰.

This notion of plastic nature later became the subject of an intense debate involving Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), Jean Le Clerc (1657-1736), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), and Damaris Masham (1659-1708), the daughter of Ralph Cudworth himself¹¹.

³ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.5, p. 150.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.21, p. 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.17, p. 160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.16, p. 159.

⁷ See *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.17, pp. 160-161.

⁸ Interestingly, the expression «instrument of Deity» does not appear within the main body of the text but is instead found as a running title on page 151.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.16, p. 159.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.5, p. 151.

¹¹ It should be noted that Cudworth employed the expression in the singular, *Plastick Nature*, to refer to the instrument subordinate to God, which executes the ordered plan of His Providence. However, he also spoke of plastic natures in the plural, meaning «those particular plastic powers in the souls of animals» (*Ibid.*, Bk. I, chap. III, §37.25, p. 171). As Antonine Nicoglou observes, in this second sense, Leibniz likely perceived a certain proximity to his notion of *entelechy*. Furthermore, Leibniz's use of the plural, *natures plastiques*, was probably influenced by «a context then largely shaped by Newtonian discoveries» (A. Nicoglou, *De la nature plastique aux natures plastiques : retour sur les usages du concept dans la philosophie de la nature des XVII^e*

This article examines key aspects of the debate on plastic natures, focusing particularly on the private correspondence between Damaris Masham and Leibniz. To achieve this, I will proceed as follows: first, I will offer a brief historical and conceptual overview of the debate on *plastic natures* (§1), which indirectly sets the stage for the exchange of letters between the English learned Lady and the German philosopher. Next, I will provide a concise summary of the central themes discussed in their correspondence (§2). Finally, I will focus on the letters in which the two correspondents engage directly with the core issues of the debate (§3). The main purpose of this work is to reconstruct a paradigmatic example of the generation and circulation of ideas in the early modern period, illustrating how private correspondence – intertwined with public forms of communication and debate – served both as a nurturing ground for philosophical and scientific concepts and doctrines, and as an intellectual network within the transnational cultural community known as the *République des Lettres*, through which these ideas and doctrines were transmitted and discussed. Of additional interest, in this context, is the active participation of Damaris Cudworth Masham, who serves as a notable example of the significant contributions of women to the intellectual life of the period, albeit frequently underappreciated.

1. The Debate on Plastic Natures

On January 13, 1699, Jean Le Clerc wrote to John Locke (1632-1704) to extend New Year's greetings and express his gratitude for the books received from Locke the previous summer. Le Clerc also extended his thanks to Lady Masham, who had recently sent him the works of her father, Ralph Cudworth¹². At the time, Locke resided at the Masham family estate in Oates, Essex¹³. In 1703, following his examination of Cudworth's texts, Le Clerc published a detailed article concerning the first chapter of *True Intellectual System of the Universe* in his *Bibliothèque Choisie, pour servir de suite à la Bibliothèque Universelle*¹⁴.

et XVII^e siècles, «Bulletin d'histoire et d'épistémologie des sciences de la vie», 19 (2), 2012, pp. 129-142: 140).

¹² See J. Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, a cura di M.G. e M. Sina, 4 voll., Firenze 1987-1997, II, #298, p. 293. Often referred to as Leclerc in contemporary texts.

¹³ The Masham Manor in Oates, as Lady Damaris describes in a letter to Leibniz, is a place that Locke «has made agreeable to others by haveing for many years chosen to spend therein a great part of his lime. Rational conversation with mutual Good will, has the greatest charmes that I know in life, and I have hitherto been very happy in respect of that enjoyment» (*GP* III, p. 361). As Luisa Simonutti observes, Locke's presence transforms Oates into a «marginally virtual» intellectual salon. This transformation is fueled not only by the physical presence of numerous visitors but also by the rich intellectual exchange facilitated through the extensive epistolary correspondence maintained by both Locke and Masham, connecting the English countryside manor with leading figures across Europe (L. Simonutti, *Lady Damaris Masham, liberty, reason and the love of God*. «Laboratorio dell'ISPF», 15, 2018, p. 2).

¹⁴ J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie, pour servir de suite à la Bibliothèque Universelle*, 28 vols., Amsterdam 1703-1718, Tome I, art. III, pp. 63-139. On the role of Cudworth in the *République des Lettres* see S. Rosa, *Ralph Cudworth in the République des Lettres: The Controversy about*

That spring, the Arminian theologian sent two copies of the first volume of his *Bibliothèque Choisie* to Locke, one of which was intended for Lady Masham and her son, Francis Cudworth Masham¹⁵. Later that year, the second volume of the *Bibliothèque Choisie* appeared, containing a continuation of the analysis of Cudworth's work¹⁶. Early in 1704, the third volume was released, opening with an article titled *Que les Payens les plus éclairés ont crû qu'il n'y a qu'un Dieu Suprême. Tiré du Chap. IV du Système Intellectuel de Mr. Cudworth*¹⁷. As before, Le Clerc ensured that copies of both volumes were sent to Locke and Lady Masham.

In August 1704, a *Mémoire communiqué par Mr. Bayle pour servir de réponse à ce qui le peut intéresser dans un ouvrage imprimé à Paris sur la distinction du bien et du mal; et au 4e article du 5e tome de la Bibliothèque choisie* was published in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans*. The first work referenced in Pierre Bayle's *Mémoire* was a volume titled *La distinction et la nature du bien et du mal*, reviewed in the December 1703 issue of *Mercure Galant*, which announced receipt of a copy from an anonymous author¹⁸. The second reference was an article by Jean Le Clerc, later published in the fifth volume of the *Bibliothèque Choisie* (1705) under the title *Éclaircissement de la doctrine de Mrs. Cudworth et Grew touchant la Nature Plastique et le Monde Vital, à l'occasion de quelques endroits de l'ouvrage de Mr. Bayle, intitulé, Continuation des pensées diverses sur les Comètes, etc. en 2 vols. in-12*¹⁹. Evidently, Bayle had early access to Le Clerc's article, as

Plastick Nature and the Reputation of Pierre Bayle, «Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture», 23, 1994, pp. 157-160. On Jean Le Clerc's interest in Cambridge Platonism and the considerable attention the Arminian theologian devotes to it within his encyclopedic *Bibliothèques*, I would like to highlight the recent A. Bianchi, *The Cambridge Platonists in Continental Europe. Critique and Erudition in the Bibliothèques of Jean Le Clerc*, in A. Fürst (ed.) *Origen's Philosophy of Freedom in Early Modern Times. Debates about Free Will and Apokatastasis in 17th-Century England and Europe*, Münster 2020, pp. 149-180.

¹⁵ See J. Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, II, #339, pp. 384-385. Both Damaris and Francis responded to Le Clerc (the young man in French, Lady Masham in English), thanking him for his article on Ralph Cudworth's work (See J. Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, II, #341 e #342, pp. 388-389).

¹⁶ J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Tome II, art. I, pp. 11-77, and II, pp. 78-130. In particular, the second article focuses on the doctrine of plastic natures. This volume also includes an *abrégé* of Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* (art. VIII, pp. 284-305), which, as Le Clerc himself notes, serves as «a kind of indirect apology for this book» (J. Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, II, #343, p. 392). All translations are mine.

¹⁷ J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Tome III, art. I, pp. 11-106.

¹⁸ See «*Mercure Galant*», Paris 1703, pp. 208-214. The work in question is, in fact, a book by Alexis Gaudin (1650?-1708?), published anonymously in 1704 by the printer Claude Cellier. From its subtitle, the book explicitly declares its intention to «combat the error of the Manicheans, the opinions of Montaigne and Charron, and those of Mr. Bayle» ([A. Gaudin], *La distinction et la nature du bien et du mal*, Paris 1704, Frontispiece).

¹⁹ J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Tome V, art. IV, pp. 283-303. In this article, Le Clerc pairs Cudworth with Nehemiah Grew (1641-1712), a renowned English naturalist and botanist, whose *Cosmologia Sacra: or a Discourse of the Universe as it is the Creature and Kingdom of God* was published in London by W. Rogers, S. Smith, and B. Walford in 1701. Le Clerc had received the volume in March 1703 from Archbishop of York John Sharp (1645-1714) (see Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, II, #337, p. 378). The Arminian was well acquainted with Grew's *The Anatomy of Plants: with an Idea of a Philosophical History of Plants and Several Other Lectures Read*

his *Mémoire* anticipates its arguments. Similarly, although Bayle's *Continuation des Pensées diverses* was printed in 1705 by Reinier Leers in Rotterdam, its circulation predates the composition of the *Mémoire*, which offers clarifications on its content.

Bayle's main criticism of Cudworth is that his efforts to refute atheism unintentionally lend support to it. According to Bayle, by rejecting Cartesian philosophy, which he considers «the most fundamentally suited to uphold the spirituality of God», Cudworth's theory of plastic natures ultimately «revives the faltering and almost frightened sect of the Peripatetics», presenting «the doctrine of substantial forms under a new guise and with new emphasis»²⁰. Bayle argues that this theory is particularly vulnerable to atheist critiques because, while it ascribes efficient causality to plastic natures, it denies them any form of consciousness regarding their operations²¹.

Le Clerc responds to this criticism in defense of Cudworth, contending that «it is undeniable that the Supreme Intelligence, whose existence has been demonstrated, has a plan for what it intends to achieve and the ends it pursues. However, it is not necessary for the subordinate causes employed in this process to possess any understanding of that plan or of God's purposes»²². He further explains that these secondary causes, immaterial beings identified as plastic natures, «are nothing more than instruments in the hands of God, and their power is strictly limited; they can do nothing beyond their assigned roles and possess no strength apart from what God has granted them»²³.

Bayle returns to this point in his *Mémoire*. He repeatedly clarifies that his previous remarks are not intended to question either Cudworth's religious zeal or, much less, his speculative abilities²⁴. Instead, he suspects that the gap between Cartesianism – «which makes God the immediate cause of all natural effects», without denying that «bodies are true instruments used by God»²⁵ – and the system of plastic natures may not be as wide as the Cambridge Platonist believes. Bayle distinguishes between the instruments of moral causes and the instruments of physical causes, and, using an analogy, explains that in a construction site, the instruments of physical causes are the tools, while those of moral causes are the workers who execute the plan under the guidance of an engineer: whereas the

Before The Royal Society (London, W. Rawlins, 1682), a work that he explicitly references in his *Physica, sive de rebus corporeis* (See J. Le Clerc, *Opera philosophica*, Amsterdam 1710, IV, p. 10).

²⁰ P. Bayle, *Continuation des Pensées diverses, Ecrites à un Docteur de Sorbonne, à l'occasion de la Comète qui parut au moins de Decembre 1680*, Rotterdam 1705, § XXI, pp. 90-91.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²² J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Tome V, art. IV, p. 296.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 297. From a theological perspective, Arminianism stands in contrast to Calvinism by asserting that the creature possesses inherent faculties, which it exercises through the use of free will. To Le Clerc, Cudworth likely appears, to some extent, to align with this position.

²⁴ P. Bayle, *Mémoire communiqué par Mr. Bayle pour servir de réponse à ce qui le peut intéresser dans un Ouvrage imprimé à Paris sur la distinction du bien et du mal, et au 4. Article du 5 tome de la Bibliothèque choisie*, «Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans», Amsterdam 1704, art. VII, pp. 369-396: *passim*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

former «are purely passive beings and do not merit the title of efficient causes», the latter are not passive and «act as true efficient causes»²⁶. If we extend this analogy to the natural system, the distinction between Cartesianism and Cudworth's hypothesis requires that the plastic natures be active beings, functioning as true efficient causes. Otherwise, if they are merely passive instruments that move only when directed, then God would remain «the sole proximate and immediate cause of all generations», thereby rendering Cudworth's system indistinguishable from the very Cartesian doctrine that «sought to reject»²⁷.

Furthermore, Bayle continues, the view that these plastic natures are immaterial entities capable of modifying and organizing matter, without any awareness of their actions, offers no advantage over the idea that the plastic virtue is directly bestowed upon matter by God: «Indeed», as the French thinker argues, «it is easier to understand how one body can move another, if God imparts the moving force, than to understand how an incorporeal thing could move, stir, and organize the parts of matter»²⁸. This reasoning, Bayle suggests, leads to significant philosophical challenges, such as proving «that the human soul is a spirit», and, more importantly, «deducing from the infinite wisdom of God that He is immaterial»²⁹. In more explicit terms, Bayle contends that unless one embraces – as do the Jesuits and Socinians – the view that creatures act independently of God, granting them physical autonomy while withholding moral autonomy, as Cudworth proposes, is ultimately ineffective³⁰.

On February 9, 1705, Pierre Coste wrote to Jean Le Clerc, enclosing a package he had received from Lady Masham. Among its contents was a postscript in response to Pierre Bayle's critique of Cudworth's philosophy. Unfortunately, this text, authored by Masham, has been lost, but it is clear that it directly challenges Bayle's claims in the *Continuation des pensées diverses*. In his letter, Coste explains that, initially, he had requested Masham's permission to open the package and extract the postscript, assuming that her objections had already been addressed by Bayle in the *Mémoire* published in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* in August 1704 – a copy of which he was careful to send her. However, he ultimately decided to send the package to Le Clerc unopened, awaiting Lady Masham's direct communication of her intentions to the Arminian theologian³¹.

In the sixth volume of the *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Le Clerc includes additional *Remarques* on Bayle's article, reaffirming that his concern that atheists could use Cudworth's hypothesis against him is entirely unfounded. As Le Clerc explains, «God is the author of the order by which plastic nature operates, whereas, according to the atheists, matter moves of its own accord, without any regulating

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 387.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

³⁰ Similar issues will resurface in Leibniz's *Essays of Theodicy* (§§ 381-403).

³¹ See J. Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, cit. II, #383, p. 527.

cause or any power given to it to move in a regular manner»³². The Arminian remarks, somewhat caustically, that «Mr. Bayle has not yet sufficiently reflected on this issue», and suggests that «the novelty of the ideas may have somewhat confused him»³³. In conclusion, Le Clerc references Masham's letter received from Coste, «in which she justly complains about Bayle's treatment of her father»³⁴. He clarifies that he had «been given the freedom to include it» in the volume but chose not to, as he believes that «Mr. Bayle may reconsider his position once he takes the time to reflect more deeply on the matter»³⁵. On June 21, 1705, Lady Masham expressed her gratitude to Le Clerc for not publishing her postscript, acknowledging that she had not yet read Bayle's *Mémoire*, but intended to do so once she received a copy of the journal in which it was published³⁶.

Bayle, for his part, seems to genuinely regret Lady Masham's displeasure, which he learned of through Pierre Coste³⁷. He asks Coste to act as an intermediary, conveying his clarifications to the noblewoman and, «if she does not understand French»³⁸, explaining his recent article published in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans*. «She will see», Bayle writes, «that Mr. Cudworth is no more offended by the objection I raised against his principle than are the Fathers of the Church, the Scholastics, the Doctors of the Anglican Church, the Reformers, the Lutherans, and so on»³⁹. Bayle further clarifies that his actions are in line with the accepted norms of intellectual debate:

It is widely understood that, in disputes, one challenges one's opponents by identifying as many undesirable consequences as possible arising from their principles – whether by asserting that they acknowledge these consequences (and at times, this may be unjust), by disregarding whether they acknowledge them or not, or by explicitly stating that they do not. This is precisely the approach I adopted, for I argued that Messrs. Cudworth and Grew, *without being aware of it*, exposed themselves to the rebuttal of one of the arguments commonly employed against atheism⁴⁰.

In a subsequent letter dated July 3, 1705, Bayle provides further justification, clarifying that his critique is not directed at Cudworth's work itself – which he openly admits to never having read directly («not knowing English, it has been impossible for me») – but rather at the extracts published by Le Clerc. «I am persuaded», he writes to Coste, referring to the *True Intellectual System*, «that it is the work of the most profound genius and the most extensive erudition

³² J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Tome VI, art. VII, p. 425.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ See J. Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, II, #395, p. 559.

³⁷ See P. Bayle, *Oeuvres diverses de Mr. Pierre Bayle* (1725), Nouvelle Édition considérablement augmentée, La Haye 1737, IV, Lettre CCCXIX à Mr. Des Maizeaux, p. 859.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, Lettre CCCXVII à Mr. Coste, p. 857.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, IV, Lettre CCCVIII à Mr. Coste, p. 858.

ever seen»⁴². However, Bayle's effort to defend Cudworth is somewhat inelegant. While he seeks to preserve the latter's honorable intentions, he simultaneously emphasizes an intellectual naïveté that, in Bayle's view, blinds Cudworth to the troubling implications of his own hypothesis. In doing so, Bayle undermines the intellectual esteem he ostensibly expresses for the Cambridge Platonist.

It is evident that Bayle's justifications fail to satisfy Lady Masham. After reading the *Memoire*, she communicates her concerns to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in a letter dated October 20 of the same year – a letter to which we shall return later⁴³.

2. The Correspondence Between Masham and Leibniz: An Overview

The interest generated by Le Clerc's engagement with Cudworth's thought did not go unnoticed by Leibniz himself, who made efforts to secure a copy of the *True Intellectual System*. He had previously encountered the work, during his *iter italicum*, thanks to the French mathematician and astronomer Adrien Auzout (1622-1691), whom he met in Rome in 1689⁴⁴. From his initial reading of Cudworth's text, Leibniz compiled several pages of notes, the *Excerpta ex Cudworthii Systemate Intellectuali*⁴⁵.

In December 1703, Gottlieb Justus von Püchler (1677-1742), an acquaintance of Leibniz residing in England, informed him that he had received Cudworth's book from Lady Masham, as requested by Leibniz, and had arranged to send it to him⁴⁶. Although the volume did not arrive until June of the following year⁴⁷, Leibniz promptly wrote to Lady Masham to express his gratitude for her kindness. Thus began an intensive philosophical correspondence, comprising twelve letters – five from Masham and seven from Leibniz – that were exchanged over approximately two years.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ I have deliberately provided only a cursory overview of Pierre Bayle's arguments, referencing those of Le Clerc only tangentially, with the sole aim of delineating the intellectual context in which the correspondence between Leibniz and Masham unfolds. For a more detailed examination of the debate between Bayle and Le Clerc on the subject of plastic natures – which, as is well known, constitutes just one dimension of a broader theological-philosophical discourse addressing the compatibility of faith and reason, as well as the problem of theodicy – I would direct readers to two essays distinguished by their exceptional depth and clarity: L. Simonutti, *Bayle and Le Clerc as Readers of Cudworth. Aspects of the Debate on Plastic Nature in the Dutch Learned Journals*, «Geschiedenis van de Wijsbegeerte in Nederland», 4, 1993, pp. 147-165; S. Brogi, *Nature plastiche e disegni divini. La polemica tra Bayle e Le Clerc*, «Studi Settecenteschi», 20, 2000, pp. 51-88.

⁴⁴ See A. Robinet, *G.W. Leibniz Iter Italicum (Mars 1689 – Mars 1690). La dynamique de la République des Lettres*, Firenze 1987, pp. 139-146; M.R. Antognazza, *Leibniz. An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge 2009, p. 300.

⁴⁵ *A* VI, 4, pp. 1943-1955.

⁴⁶ See *A* I-22, p. 759. Alongside the *True Intellectual System*, Lady Masham also sent Leibniz a copy of *A Discourse Concerning the True Notion of the Lord's Supper*, published in London in 1642 (see *GP* III, p. 338).

⁴⁷ See *GP* III, p. 357.

The philosophical significance of the correspondence has, in recent decades, attracted considerable scholarly attention, with various aspects being analysed from different perspectives: Leibniz's principle of uniformity, according to which «all the time and everywhere everything's the same as here»⁴⁸; the metaphysical depth of Masham's reflections within the context of early modern debates, and her ability to critically engage her eminent interlocutor on matters such as substance and pre-established harmony⁴⁹; the moral implications arising from their exchange⁵⁰; the points of agreement and disagreement between the philosophical positions of the two correspondents⁵¹; as well as the exemplary nature of the Masham case within the broader phenomenon of women's involvement in intellectual life, despite the persistent social mechanisms of marginalization⁵².

In the following pages, I will set aside many of these points of interest – although I intend to examine them more thoroughly in future studies – and instead focus in this section on providing an intellectual framework for the correspondence between Lady Masham and Leibniz. In the next section, I will delve more deeply into Damaris Masham's response to Pierre Bayle's critique of Ralph Cudworth's theory of plastic natures. Specifically, I will analyze the argument articulated by the learned Lady in her letter to Leibniz dated October 20, 1705, and his subsequent response.

At the time their correspondence began, Leibniz was unaware of Lady Masham's scholarly contributions. During this period, she was in the process of writing *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life*, which would be published in London in 1705 by Awnsham and John Churchill. It was only after their exchange of letters had concluded that Leibniz learned of her authorship of *A Discourse Concerning the Love of God* (published by the same printers in 1696). This revelation came when Pierre Coste provided him with a

⁴⁸ GP III, p. 340. On this, see P. Phemister, "All the time and everywhere everything's the same as here". *The Principle of Uniformity in the Correspondence Between Leibniz and Lady Masham*, in P. Lodge (ed.), *Leibniz and His Correspondents*, Cambridge 2004, pp. 193-213.

⁴⁹ See A. L. da Silva Marinho, *Damaris Cudworth Masham e a construção da metafísica moderna*, «Revista Ideação», 42, 2020, pp. 481-498; M. L. Ribeiro Ferreira, *Quando mulheres obrigam os filósofos a explicar-se. Lady Masham e Leibniz*, in A. Cardoso e M. L. Ribero Ferreira (eds.), *Correspondência entre G. W. Leibniz e Lady Masham*, Lisboa 2010, pp. 11-31; Ead., *Quando as mulheres escrevem aos filósofos. Elisabeth da Boémia e Damaris Cudworth*, «Seiscentos», Rio de Janeiro, 1 (2), 2021, e49222.

⁵⁰ See V. Platas, *La dimensión crítica de la moral: la correspondencia Masham-Leibniz*, «Filosofia Unisinos. Unisinos Journal of Philosophy», 22 (3), 2021, e22303.

⁵¹ See A. Cardoso, *Os limites da convergência de sistemas: um percurso da afinidade à discrepância*, in A. Cardoso e M.L. Ribero Ferreira (eds.), *Correspondência entre G. W. Leibniz e Lady Masham*, pp. 33-50.

⁵² On this, see: J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 114-140; R. C. Sleight, *Reflections on the Masham-Leibniz Correspondence*, in C. Mercer and E. O'Neill (eds.), *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, Oxford 2005, pp. 119-126.

copy of the French translation of the work, issued in 1705 in Amsterdam under the title *Discours sur l'amour divin*⁵³.

In his first letter, Leibniz expresses his admiration for the system developed by Cudworth, emphasizing that the Cambridge Platonist's reflections operate within a framework closely aligned with his own metaphysical inquiries: «The subject also interests me greatly», he writes to Masham, «for I have reflected deeply on this matter, and I even claim to have discovered a new region within this intelligible world, thereby expanding, if only slightly, the great system that your father has left us»⁵⁴. The *new region* discovered by Leibniz is the system of pre-established harmony, first presented in the *Journal des Sçavans* in 1695⁵⁵, and later a point of contention with Pierre Bayle in the article *Rorarius* in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, especially in the second edition⁵⁶.

Although Lady Masham did not have access to the second edition of Bayle's *Dictionnaire*, she had the opportunity to read both the *Système Nouveau* published in the *Journal des Sçavants* and the article *Rorarius* in the first edition of Bayle's encyclopedic work. Based on these readings, she wrote to Leibniz seeking clarification about his new system. While her tone was highly deferential, the questions she posed revealed significant reservations:

Perhaps – she says – my not being accusom'd to such abstract speculations made me not well comprehend what you say there of *Formes*, upon which I think you build your Hypothesis: for (as it seemes to me) you sometimes call them *Forces Primitives*, sometimes des *Ames* sometimes *Formes constitutives des substances*, and sometimes substances themselves; but such yet as are neither Spirit, nor matter whence I confess I have no cleare Idea of what you call *Formes*⁵⁷.

At this point in their correspondence, Leibniz begins to present his hypothesis of pre-established harmony, a topic that occupies the subsequent three letters, in which, prompted by Masham's critical remarks, he refines his arguments and analysis with increasing sophistication⁵⁸. He explains that,

⁵³ Upon receiving the volume in the summer of 1706, Leibniz replied to Coste with remarks on its content but appeared still unaware of the author's identity. In his letter, he even referred to the author using the masculine form (see *GP III*, p. 386). However, on February 22, 1707, he wrote to Thomas Burnet of Kemnay, stating that he had learned from Coste that Lady Masham was indeed the author. Leibniz further observed that «her opinions are quite aligned with those of Locke» (*GP III*, p. 313).

⁵⁴ *GP III*, p. 336: «La matiere aussi m'interesse beaucoup, car j'ay fort pensé sur ce sujet, et je pretends même d'avoir découvert un nouveau pays dans ce monde intelligible, et d'avoir ainsi augmenté un peu ce grand système, que Monsieur vostre Pere nous a laissé».

⁵⁵ G.W. Leibniz, *Système Nouveau de la Nature et de la Communication des Substances, aussi bien de l'union qu'il y a entre l'âme et le corps*, «*Journal des Sçavans*», XXV, 27 June 1695, pp. 444-454; XXVI, 4 July 1695, pp. 455-462.

⁵⁶ See P. Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 16 vols., Paris 1820, XII, «*Rorarius*», note (H), pp. 608-611; note (L), pp. 616-622.

⁵⁷ *GP III*, p. 337.

⁵⁸ A particularly effective and detailed presentation is found in the letter dated June 30, 1704, in which Leibniz provides an analytical reply to the difficulties raised by Masham, organizing his arguments into fourteen points (*GP III*, pp. 352-357).

despite the diversity in the modes, degrees, and perfections of things, Nature fundamentally observes the principle of uniformity, which implies that there is a certain proportion between substances beyond our perception and those within our reach⁵⁹. Just as we possess a simple being capable of both action and perception, so too, throughout all matter, there are similar active beings, differing only in the manner of their perception. The *simple being* within us is known as the *soul*, and it is distinct from the souls of other known bodies. Nevertheless, he argues, «whether these principles of action are called *forms*, *entelechies*, *souls*, *spirits*, or whether these terms are distinguished by the notions one prefers to assign them, the things themselves will remain unchanged»⁶⁰. The souls present in human beings, he adds, are indestructible, uncreated, and imperishable in the same way as the souls of animals and every other organic creature.

Leibniz further explains that these souls or entelechies are always connected to a body or portion of matter, which they have always had and will have eternally:

[...] Thus, not only the soul, but even the animal itself [...] endures, and consequently, both generation and death can only be developments and enfoldments, of which nature visibly provides us with certain examples according to her usual course, to help us infer what she conceals. Therefore, neither iron, nor fire, nor any other violent forces of nature – no matter how much they may ravage the body of an animal – can prevent the soul from retaining a certain organic body⁶¹.

It follows that there are no spirits in the universe completely free from the body, except for the supreme being. However, bodies act according to the laws of mechanics, while souls produce internal actions within themselves, «without either the laws of the body being disturbed by the actions of the soul, or the bodies finding any windows through to exert their influences on the souls»⁶². The agreement between soul and body, therefore, is better explained by the hypothesis of pre-established harmony than by occasionalism, which assumes a constant divine intervention to modify natural laws: «What is surprising in this regard is that God's works are infinitely more beautiful and harmonious than had previously been believed»⁶³. As he would later explain in a subsequent letter, Leibniz maintains that only three plausible hypotheses can account for the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 339: «Que ces principes d'Action et de perception soyent appellés maintenant *Formes*, *Entelechies*, *Ames*, *Esprits*, ou qu'on distingue ces Termes selon les Notions qu'on voudra bien leur attribuer, les choses n'en seront point changes».

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340: «[...] de sorte que non seulement l'ame, mais encor l'animal même [...] demeure, et qu'ainsi la generation et la mort ne peuvent estre que des developpemens et enveloppemens dont la nature nous monstre visiblement quelques échantillons selon sa coustume, pour nous aider à deviner ce qu'elle cache. Et par consequent ny le fer ny le feu, ny toutes les autres violences de la nature, quelque ravage qu'elles fassent dans le corps d'un animal, ne sauroient empêcher l'ame de garder un certain corps organique».

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 341: «sans que les loix corporelles soyent troublées par les Actions de l'ame, ny que les corps trouvent des fenestres pour faire entrer leur influences dans les ames».

⁶³ *Ibid.*: «Tout ce qui en suit de surprenant est, que les Ouvrages de Dieu sont infiniment plus beaux et plus harmoniques qu'on n'avoit crû».

union and relation between soul and body: the hypothesis of *influence*, according to which soul and body act immediately upon one another, yet mutually break each other's natural laws; the hypothesis of *occasional causes*, according to which God, intervening at intervals, would constantly disturb the laws of the body to adapt it to the soul, and vice versa; and the hypothesis of *pre-established harmony*, which is the only one, according to Leibniz, that respects and preserves the laws of both natures⁶⁴.

Although Masham's letters are interspersed with expressions of modesty and, at times, apparent self-deprecation, they demonstrate a keen ability to critically engage with and challenge her correspondent's arguments. For example, on June 3, 1704, after summarizing Leibniz's position – expressly to «be sure of haveing a certain and cleare knowledge of your hypothesis» and to allow for correction if needed⁶⁵ – she addresses him as follows:

I see nothing, peculiar, which seems not possible. I find a uniformitie in it which pleases me: and the advantages propos'd from this Hypothesis are very desirable. But *it appears not yet to me that this is more than a Hypothesis*; for as Gods ways are not limited by our conceptions; the unintelligibleness or inconceivableness by us of any way but one, dos not methinks, much induce a Beleeve of that, being the way which God has chosen to make use of. Yet *such an inference as this from our Ignorance*, I remember P. Malbranche (or some other assertor of his Hypothesis) would make in behalf of Occasional Causes⁶⁶.

Despite Leibniz's persistent efforts, Lady Masham's evaluation remained unchanged, and the hypothesis of pre-established harmony, however intriguing, continued to appear to her as nothing more than a conjecture rendered plausible solely by the limitations of human knowledge. In this respect, the position of the learned Lady seems to reflect a distinctly Lockean epistemology, which confines the scope of human understanding to the capacities of the intellect. Beyond this one operates within the realm of probability rather than certainty.

Leibniz, for his part, was firmly persuaded that John Locke exerted a significant influence on the correspondence between himself and the English noblewoman. Indeed, in a letter dated August 2, 1704, addressed to his friend Thomas Burnet of Kemnay, he wrote the following:

I consider the correspondence I have with My Lady Masham as if I were, in part, corresponding with Mr. Locke himself. Since he was staying with her at her country estate in Oates while this lady wrote to me and replied regarding my philosophical hypothesis – indeed, she even noted that Mr. Locke saw our letters – it seems likely that he played some role, at least through the judgments he undoubtedly formed and seemingly did not conceal from her⁶⁷.

⁶⁴ See *GP* III, pp. 353-354.

⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 349.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 350. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁷ *GP* III, pp. 297-298: «Je considere la correspondence que j'ay avec Mylady Masham, comme si je l'avois avec Mons. Lock luy même en partie, car puisqu'il estoit chez elle à la campagne à Oates, lorsque cette dame m'écrivait et me repondoit sur mon hypothese philosophique et

This explains why Leibniz repeatedly attempts to engage directly with the empiricist philosopher, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he claims to have read and believes he can «resolve certain difficulties and address some *desiderata*»⁶⁸. As a perfect citizen of the *République des Lettres*, Leibniz understandably aspires to initiate a dialogue with one of the most eminent thinkers of his time. To this end, he explicitly relies on Lady Masham's mediation, writing to her on October 7, 1704: «Your influence with him gives me hope that we might benefit from it to gain some insight through your intercession. I would be delighted if it could reach me»⁶⁹.

Unfortunately, Leibniz's plan would never come to fruition, as Locke passed away at the end of that same month.

Just a few weeks later, on February 1, 1705, Leibniz was deeply affected by a personal loss. A sudden pneumonia claimed the life of Sophie-Charlotte, Queen of Prussia (1668-1705), at the age of thirty-six. She was the daughter of Sophia of Hanover (1630-1714), and Leibniz was deeply devoted to her. The loss greatly affected him, paralyzing his intellectual activities to such an extent that his correspondence with Lady Masham ceased for several months⁷⁰. When he eventually regained the mental energy to resume writing to her, Leibniz shared with her only a few points of Locke's philosophy with which he disagreed and wished to have debated directly with the English philosopher. In particular, he focused on Locke's views on the creation of material substances, as Leibniz believed that bodies implied the existence of immaterial substances, and on the issue of anti-innatism, stating that «the experiences or observations of the senses can never prove that a truth is absolutely necessary»⁷¹. However, the impossibility of engaging in direct debate with Locke, due to his death, led Leibniz to shift the subject and return to discussing Ralph Cudworth's system, seeking elements of compatibility with his own theory of pre-established harmony. He wrote as follows:

[...] I am with him against fatalism, and I hold with him that justice is natural, and by no means arbitrary; that God has made things in such a way that it was possible, for him, to do otherwise, but not to do better; that the very constitution of bodies compels us to admit the existence of immaterial substances; [...] that souls are always united to some organic body [...]; that incorporeal substance has an internal active force or energy. As for the plastic nature, I accept it in general, and I believe with Mr.

marquait même que Mons. Lock voyoit nos lettres, il y a apparence qu'il y a quelque part, au moins par le jugement qu'il en faisoit sans doute, et qu'il ne dissimuloit pas apparemment auprès de cette dame».

⁶⁸ GP III, p. 342: «lever quelques difficultés et de remplir quelques *desiderata*».

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 364: «Vostre credit auprès de luy me fait esperer que nous en pourrions profiter pour obtenir quelque lumiere par vostre entremise. Je serois ravi si elle pouvoit parvenir jusqu'à moy»

⁷⁰ On the relationship between Leibniz and Sophie-Charlotte, as well as the grief he experienced upon her death, see: M.R. Antognazza, *Leibniz. An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 381, 436-438; L. Strickland, *Leibniz and the Two Sophies*, Toronto 2011, pp. 15-20.

⁷¹ GP III, p. 368: «[...] les experiences ou observations des sens ne pouvant jamais prouver qu'une verité est absolument necessaire».

Cudworth that animals were not formed mechanically by something non-organic [...]. However, I am of the opinion that this plastic force is mechanical in itself and consists in a preformation, and in already existing organs, which alone were capable of forming other organs. Thus, I merely explain what Mr. Cudworth left unexplained⁷².

3. Masham and Leibniz *contra* Bayle

Masham responded on October 20, 1705, with a long and detailed letter. After offering her condolences for the loss of the Queen of Prussia and demonstrating genuine empathy toward Leibniz⁷³, she also expressed regret that Locke's death had discouraged him from sharing his reflections on the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Nonetheless, she encouraged Leibniz to continue «explaining at large» his system to ensure that no part of it would be lost or misunderstood. As Masham observed, «It were to be wish'd that all who in respect of any usefull truth, have views beyond others would not neglect to communicate them»⁷⁴.

Since engaging in dialogue with Locke was no longer possible, the learned Lady suggested that Leibniz might instead draw inspiration from the opinions of other thinkers, such as Pierre Bayle. Referring to the debate between Bayle and Jean Le Clerc over the notion of plastic nature, Lady Masham expressed her dissatisfaction with Bayle's interpretation of her father's system. In her view, Bayle's argument lacked persuasive force and amounted «to any thing more than a begging of the question»⁷⁵.

Masham begins by clarifying that Cudworth, in his hypothesis, «does not therein assert (as Mr. Bayle says he does) that *God has been able to give to creatures a facultie of produceing excellent works, (viz such as is the organization of plants and animals) seperate from all knowledge &c*: but onely a facultie of executing

⁷² *Ibid.*: «Je suis avec luy contre la fatalité, et je tiens comme luy que la justice est naturelle, et nullement arbitraire, que Dieu a fait les choses d'une telle maniere, qu'il estoit possible de faire autrement, mais non pas de faire mieux; que la constitution même des corps nous oblige à admettre les substances immatérielles; [...] que les ames sont tousjours unies à quelque corps organique [...]; que la substance incorporelle a une energie ou force active interne. Pour ce qui est de la nature plastique, je l'admets en general, et je crois avec M. Cudworth, que les animaux n'ont pas esté formés mecaniquement par quelque chose de non organique [...]. Mais je suis pourtant d'opinion que cette force plastique est mecanique elle-même, et consiste dans une preformation, et dans des organes déjà existens, qui ont esté seuls capables de former d'autres organes. Ainsi j'explique seulement ce que M. Cudworth laissoit sans explication».

⁷³ «One cannot have a deeper sense than I have of your particular loss in this universal one: and if ever Greif was just yours must he allow'd to be so» (*GP* III, p. 369). Masham agrees with her correspondent that, in certain circumstances, reason holds little authority over grief. However, she offers him comfort by assuring him that, in the case of wise individuals, «if their reason does not always triumph, it yet at least hinders passion from doing so: and it is a happy distinction not to be led captive by those tyrants under which the generalitie of mankind suffer a worse slavery than the most arbitrarie masters can inflict» (*Ibid.*).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

instrumentally his ideas or designs, in the production of such *excellent works*⁷⁶. Masham further explains that the operations of plastic nature are *essentially* and *necessarily* dependent on the ideas within the divine intellect. However, this dependency does not entail that God must continuously intervene in these operations, as plastic natures are endowed with the «pow'r to execute the ideas of a perfect mind»⁷⁷.

Cudworth's hypothesis, she continues, rests upon two fundamental components: the *idea* of the work to be accomplished (such as the organization of plants and animals) and the *executive power* to bring that idea into actual existence. While the former pertains to the creative mind, only the latter is the domain of plastic natures.

Bayle, however, asserts that plastic natures, lacking consciousness in their operations, cannot possess intrinsic efficacy and thus require perpetual direction – namely, continuous divine intervention akin to that conjectured by the occasionalists. Yet, as Masham observes, Bayle merely asserts this claim without offering any substantiating evidence. In her view, this amounts to a clear instance of *petitio principii* (begging the question), which she argues can be effectively contested with a few straightforward considerations. She argues as follows:

But to any ones bare assertion that a thing is inconceivable, it is surely answer sufficient that others find it not to be so. Tho my father has giv'n some instances which he thinks prove the possibilitie of such a manner of action as he ascribes to plastick natures; viz in the operations of *Habits*: as (for example) those of singing and dancing: which shall oftentimes direct the motions of the body, or voice, without any consideration of what the next note, or motion should be⁷⁸.

Furthermore, Damaris Masham continues, if by *perpetual direction* Bayle means, as he explicitly does, only the intervention of God as the «immediate efficient cause of all the effects of nature»⁷⁹, then such a notion is entirely excluded from Cudworth's system. However, if that expression instead signifies that the operations of plastic natures «are always determin'd by the ideas in the divine intellect»⁸⁰, then perpetual direction is fully compatible with the hypothesis advanced by Cudworth. Should Bayle believe that Cudworth's position involves any contradiction or inconsistency, Masham firmly asserts, shifting the burden of proof onto her opponent, «it lies upon Mr. Bayle to show that he dos so, stating first rightly what is herein asserted by him»⁸¹.

The learned Lady also points out that it would be erroneous to assume, as Bayle suggests, that Cudworth devised his hypothesis as a critique of modern Cartesians (namely the occasionalists). Indeed, she remarks, «he (not understanding French) did not know that the modern Cartesians differ'd so

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

much from their master as to hold that God was the immediate efficient cause of all the effects of nature»⁸².

In closing, Masham explicitly requests Leibniz's opinion on the matter, employing one of her habitual expressions of modesty – expressions that, in my view, reflect a sophisticated interplay of deliberate affectation, irony, and self-awareness:

I pretend not at all to be positive in any thing which I have here ventur'd to say on so nice a subject, and so much above my examination as not easilie to be set in a due light by two so acute and extraordinarie men as both Mr. Le Clerc and Mr. Bayle are. I onelie take the libertie briefly to suggest to you my thoughts thereon to the end that I may learn from you how far they are right⁸³.

Like Masham does, Leibniz dissents from Bayle, arguing that «matter, although deprived of knowledge, can act in a way that is suited to achieve an end»⁸⁴ without requiring any special direction from God. This, he contends, is because God has «originally endowed matter with a structure capable of producing actions in accordance with reason over time»⁸⁵. Such a view aligns with his hypothesis of pre-established harmony. Nevertheless, Leibniz insists that his hypothesis differs from all others, including that of Cudworth:

I would not wish to employ in natural things this particular direction of God, which can only be miraculous, nor resort to *incorporeal plastic natures* that *would have no advantage over the machine*. I will therefore say that *bodies have within them plastic natures*, but these natures are nothing other than the machine itself, which produces excellent works without having knowledge of what it does, because these machines were invented by a Master even more excellent. *The plastic force is in the machine*, but the idea of what it does is in God⁸⁶.

Leibniz's reservations regarding the admission of plastic natures as conceived by Cudworth are particularly evident, in this passage, as his system of pre-established harmony precludes the existence of any incorporeal entity endowed with vital energy other than the monad. Nevertheless, he acknowledges an intrinsic operativity within the corporeal machine, which is capable of producing excellent works without awareness of its actions, an ability grounded

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 374: «la matiere, quoyque destituée de connoissance, peut agir d'une maniere propre à obtenir une fin».

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*: «[Dieu] luy a donné d'abord une structure propre à produire dans le temps des actions conformes à la raison».

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*: «je ne voudrais pas employer dans les choses naturelles cette direction particuliere de Dieu qui ne peut estre que miraculeuse, ny recourir à des *natures plastiques incorporelles* qui *n'auront aucun avantage sur la machine*. Je diray donc que *les corps ont en eux des natures plastiques*, mais que ces natures ne sont autre chose que leur machine même, laquelle produit des ouvrages excellens sans avoir connoissance de ce qu'elle fait, parceque ces Machines ont esté inventées par un Maistre encor plus excellent. *La force plastique est dans la Machine*, mais l'idée de ce qu'elle fait est en Dieu» (emphasis mine).

in the divine idea of that very operativity⁸⁷. Similarly, Leibniz finds the suggestion that plastic natures might contribute to the formation of animals unacceptable. He maintains that, in the universe created by God, nothing organic can arise *ex nihilo* or be entirely annihilated.

This argument, though not elaborated in his correspondence with Masham, is clarified in a coeval work published in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* in May 1705, titled *Considerations sur le Principes de Vie, et sur le Natures Plastiques, par l'Auteur du Système de l'Harmonie préétablie*. In this text, Leibniz asserts that «animals are never naturally formed from a non-organic mass»⁸⁸. Nature, adhering strictly to universal mechanical laws, is «incapable of producing anew these infinitely varied organs». However, «can very well derive them through the development and transformation of a pre-existing organic body»⁸⁹.

Returning to the letter addressed to Lady Masham, Leibniz suggests that the hypothesis of preformation, within his system of pre-established harmony, would be further supported by the example cited by Cudworth – and recalled by his daughter in the previous letter –, namely the so-called «habitual acts»⁹⁰, or automatic gestures performed without apparent conscious reflection, such as when playing a musical instrument: «The machine», Leibniz writes, «is capable of acting reasonably without knowing it, when it has been predisposed for that purpose by a rational substance; for one would not play so well without thinking about it unless one had previously prepared oneself by acquiring the necessary disposition, having thought about it while learning to play»⁹¹. In

⁸⁷ The concept will resurface in his *Theodicy* (§403), where Leibniz, continuing his polemic with Pierre Bayle, explains that there is no necessity «for one always to be aware how that which is done is done», because in nature many things «are produced by a certain *instinct* that God has placed there, that is by virtue of divine *preformation*, which has made these admirable automata, adapted to produce mechanically such beautiful effects». Among natural automata, the spiritual one, namely the soul, is certainly the most marvelous, capable of producing ideas without the assistance of the will: «The operation of spiritual automata, that is of souls, is not mechanical, but it contains in the highest degree all that is beautiful in mechanism» (*GP VI*, p. 356; English translation in G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, ed. with an Introduction of A. Ferrer, trans. by E.M. Huggard, Charleston 2007, p. 369).

⁸⁸ G.W. Leibniz, *Considerations sur le Principes de Vie, et sur le Natures Plastiques, par l'Auteur du Système de l'Harmonie préétablie*, «Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans», Amsterdam 1705, art. IX, pp. 222-236: 232: «les animaux n'étant jamais formez naturellement d'une masse non organique».

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: «incapable de produire de nouveau ces organes infiniment varieez, les peut fort bien tirer par un developpement & par une transformation d'un corps organique pre- existant». Although the official publication date is May 1705, it was not until the end of that year that Leibniz transmitted the manuscript to Henry Basnage de Beauval (1656–1710), editor of *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans*. The latter subsequently informed the German philosopher, in a letter dated January 15, 1706, that he had incorporated the work into his journal (*GP III*, pp. 141-142).

⁹⁰ *GP III*, p. 374: «actions habituelles».

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 374-375: «la Machine est capable d'agir raisonnablement sans le savoir, lorsqu'elle y a esté predisposée par une substance raisonnable; car on ne joueroit pas si bien sans y penser assés, si on ne s'estoit donné auparavant la disposition necessaire pour cela, lorsqu'on y avoit pensé en apprenant à jouer».

this regard, the *universal direction* that God imparts to all created things differs significantly from the *particular direction* referenced by Bayle. While the latter is viewed as an exceptional intervention, a true miracle, in contrast to the natural course of things, the former, Leibniz argues, «preserves things according to the laws of nature»⁹². Furthermore, using the well-known metaphor of God as a watchmaker, he adds that «it is the skill of a more capable workman to make a clock that runs well with less need for particular direction»⁹³. Thus, Leibniz

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 375: «Dieu conserve les choses suivant les loix de la nature». In the *Discours de métaphysique* (1686), Leibniz asserts that «God does nothing outside of order, and it is not even possible to imagine events that are not regular» (A VI, 4 B, p. 1537, §6: «Dieu ne fait rien hors d'ordre et il n'est pas mêmes possible de feindre des evenemens qui ne soyent point reguliers»). Although divine will is traditionally divided into ordinary and extraordinary acts, Leibniz clarifies that, in reality, everything aligns with the universal order and that «what appears extraordinary is so only with respect to some particular order established by creatures» (*Ibid.*: «ce qui passe pour extraordinaire, ne l'est qu'à l'égard de quelque ordre particulier establi parmy les creatures»). Grounded in this universal order, God creates the world by selecting «the one that is the most perfect, that is to say, the one that is at once the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena» (*Ibid.*, p. 1538: «celuy qui est le plus parfait, c'est à dire celuy qui est en même temps le plus simple en hypotheses et le plus riche en phenomenes»). However, the architecture of the ordered universe exhibits a layered complexity, as beneath this overarching order lie «subordinate maxims» (*Ibid.*, p. 1538, §7: «maximes subalternes») that govern the nature of things. To these, God may prescribe certain «exceptions» (*Ibid.*, p. 1539) through the exercise of his particular wills, while nonetheless remaining in harmony with the general order. In this way, Leibniz integrates miracles into the framework of the universal harmony, ensuring that it remains intact. As Francesco Piro observes, in exercising his particular wills, Leibniz's God can never make a decision that violates the general rule. Rather, like all rational beings, God must adhere to another rule that supersedes the first. Nevertheless, God's choices are invariably drawn from coordinated sets of possibilities, specifically from among series of possibles mutually compossible (F. Piro, *L'argomento del "miracolo perpetuo" e i suoi sottintesi teologici. Ancora sui rapporti Leibniz-Malebranche*, «Laboratorio dell'ISPF», 14, 2017, p. 11).

⁹³ GP III, p. 375: «il est d'un plus habile ouvrier de faire une horloge qui va bien avec moins d'aide d'une direction particuliere». Absent from the 1695 communication of the new system of pre-established harmony, Leibniz developed this metaphor in response to the critical observations of Simon Foucher. In describing the Leibnizian hypothesis of the «concomitance» between soul and body – which he considered «a system no more advantageous than that of the Cartesians» («ce système n'est de guere plus avantageux que celui des Cartesiens») – Foucher employed the image of God as the «great artisan of the universe» («grand artisan de l'univers»), who «ensures that two clocks are so well synchronized and act so uniformly that, at the moment clock A strikes noon, clock B will also strike the same hour, giving the impression that these two clocks are moved by the same weight or the same force» (S. Foucher, *Réponse de M. S. F. à M. de L. B. Z. sur son nouveau système de la communication des substances, proposé dans les Journaux du 27. Juin & du 4. Juillet 1695*, «Journal des Sçavans», XXXVI, 12 September 1695, pp. 639-645: 641-642: «que deux horloges s'accordent si bien, & agissent si uniformément, que dans le moment que l'horloge A sonnera midi, l'horloge B le sonne aussi, en sorte que l'on s' imagine que ces deux horloges ne soient conduits que par un mesme poids ou un mesme ressort»). Leibniz first employed the metaphor in the following year (See G.W. Leibniz, *Extrait d'une lettre de Monsieur de Leibniz sur son Hypothese de Philosophie, & sur le problème curieux qu'un de ses amis propose aux Matematiciens; avec une remarque sur quelques points contestez dans les Journaux precedens, entre l'auteur des principes de Physique, & celui des objections contre ces principe*, «Journal des Sçavans», XXXVIII, 19 November 1696, pp. 707-713).

concludes, «I believe, therefore, that all the difficulties raised regarding plastic natures are resolved in the way I have just explained»⁹⁴.

In conclusion, although there are significant differences between his system of pre-established harmony and that of Cudworth, Leibniz nonetheless concurs with Lady Masham in asserting that, contrary to Bayle's position, «in Mr. Cudworth's system, where plastic natures are guided by God's ideas, atheists have no grounds for objection to escape the argument derived from the wonders of nature, any more than in the system of occasional causes, which requires particular direction everywhere»⁹⁵.

The controversy did not conclude at that point, as Le Clerc continued to publish excerpts from Cudworth's work in his *Bibliothèque Choisie*⁹⁶, defending him against Bayle's accusations of atheism. At the same time, Leibniz, in addition to the previously mentioned *Considerations* published in the *Histoire des Ouvrages des Savans* in May 1705, entrusted Basnage de Bauval with another similar work, titled *Éclaircissement sur les Natures Plastiques et les Principes de vie et de Mouvement, par l'Auteur du Système de l'Harmonie préétablie*⁹⁷, intended to be delivered privately to Le Clerc. On November 10, 1705, Thomas Burnet of Kemnay, who facilitated the circulation of these writings, informed Leibniz that he had received a brief note of commentary from Le Clerc:

It would have been desirable – Le Clerc wrote – if Mr. Leibniz had taken the time to explain his views in a manner both clear and accessible to all those with even a modest understanding of philosophy. His writing will appear full of paradoxes to those who do not grasp his thought and will give rise to countless questions that no one but he can resolve. Thus, another explanation would be necessary, one so clear that it could not be misunderstood. I would also have preferred that he refrained from discussing Mr. Cudworth's *natures plastiques* without first reading what I have written on the subject in volumes VI and VII of the *Bibliothèque Choisie*. I am convinced that Mr.

⁹⁴ GP III, p. 375: «Je crois donc que toutes les difficultés qu'on s'est fait sur les natures plastiques cessent de la manière que je viens de les expliquer».

⁹⁵ Ibid.: «[...] dans le système de M. Cudworth, où les natures plastiques sont dirigées par les idées de Dieu: les Athées ne trouvent point de sujet de retorsion pour eluder l'argument tiré des merveilles de la nature, non plus que dans le système des causes occasionnelles qui demande celle direction particulière par tout». Although in this passage Leibniz explicitly refers to the system of occasional causes, and thus to Malebranche, as Francesco Piro observes, the argument of the *continuous miracle* is not directed exclusively against occasionalism. Rather, Leibniz employs it to critique a broader range of theories he considers erroneous, including Gassendi's atomism, which fails to account for the cohesion of bodies, and that of Huygens and Hartsoecker, which postulates the existence of bodies of infinite hardness, Socinianism, which cannot explain the life of the soul after the death of the body, Cartesian dynamics, inadequate in its explanation of the conservation of quantity of motion, and finally Newton, whose hypothesis of universal gravitation appears to Leibniz as the quintessential example of the perpetual miracle (See F. Piro, *L'argomento del "miracolo perpetuo" e i suoi sottintesi teologici*, pp. 2-3).

⁹⁶ See J. Le Clerc, *Bibliothèque Choisie*, Tome VII, art. I, pp. 19-80; Tome VIII, art. I pp. 11-42 e art. II, pp. 43-106; Tome IX, art. I, pp. 1-40 e art. II, pp. 41-103.

⁹⁷ GP VI, pp. 546-555.

Cudworth offers no grounds for atheistic objections, and that Mr. Leibniz will come to agree with this if he reflects further on the matter⁹⁸.

At this point, Leibniz requested that Burnet of Kemnay return the manuscript, advising him not to share it with anyone else. He confessed to his friend that he had reconsidered publishing it⁹⁹.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have broadly outlined the dispute over the plastic natures through the correspondence between Damaris Masham and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. This dispute serves as an example of intellectual life within the early modern *République des Lettres*. In this community, ideas are not only shared but also debated, criticized (often in harsh terms), and defended (frequently with great force). Intellectual correspondences, in this context, assume a central role, not merely because, from a historiographical standpoint, they provide an invaluable source for understanding the development of philosophical and scientific thought, but also because, as mentioned above in the introduction, they constitute a vast intellectual framework within a networked community, unbounded by geographical or linguistic constraints. In this Republic of Letters, intellectual correspondences transcend the mere fulfilment of interpersonal communication needs; they frequently intertwine the private sphere (e.g., daily life, family matters, physical and mental health conditions) with the public realm, thereby facilitating the generation, evolution, and dissemination of ideas.

This is particularly evident in the correspondence between Lady Masham and Leibniz, which, as we have seen, involves various figures, notably Bayle and Le Clerc, but also Locke and Coste. Moreover, in this specific case, an additional point of interest lies in the participation of a woman in the philosophical discourse – an event still perceived today as remarkable, or at least as an aspect worthy of emphasis, despite recent progress toward a more inclusive narrative of Western intellectual history¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁸ *A I*, 25, p. 279: «Il auroit été à souhaiter que Mr Leibniz eût pris la peine d'expliquer son sentiment d'une manière claire et proportionnée à la portée de tous ceux qui savent un peu de Philosophie. Son écrit paroîtra plein de paradoxes à ceux qui n'entendent pas sa pensée, et fera naître mille questions que personne ne peut résoudre que lui. Ainsi il faudroit un autre si clair, qu'on ne pût pas s'y tromper. J'aurois aussi bien voulu qu'il n'eût pas parlé des natures Plastiques de Mr Cudworth, sans avoir lû ce que j'en ai dit dans le VI et VII Tomes de la Bibliothèque Choisie. Je suis persuadé que Mr Cudworth ne donne aucun lieu à la retortion des Athées, et que Mr Leibniz s'en convaincra, s'il médite un peu plus alla matière».

⁹⁹ See *A I*, 25, pp. 378, 396.

¹⁰⁰ As Sarah Hutton notes, much has changed since the scientific community began to integrate women into the history of philosophy. In the past, in order to draw attention to a female philosopher, it was necessary to emphasize her connection to an eminent male thinker – in the case of Damaris Masham, for example, John Locke. Today, however, according to Hutton, this is no longer necessary. On the contrary, we are now ready to explore the possibility that women, often regarded as disciples of a thinker, may have actually influenced his thought (See S. Hutton, *Damaris Masham, Ralph Cudworth and John Locke: Some Philosophical Continuities*, «Studia z Historii Filozofii», 12 (3), 2021, pp. 11-35: 12-13). For a recent discussion on the

This article does not aim to produce an apology for the speculative abilities of Damaris Masham, which are already widely recognized by scholars¹⁰¹. These abilities are evident not only from her letters to Leibniz but also from the analysis of her published works, namely the *Discourse concerning the Love of God* (1696) and *Occasional Thoughts in Reference to a Vertuous or Christian Life* (1705). Historically, it is common to interpret the correspondence between Masham and Leibniz from a Leibnizian perspective, emphasizing the contributions that the German philosopher was prompted to make by the reflections of his English correspondent. This is due to the evolution of their epistolary exchange: while Leibniz repeatedly defends, explains, and analyzes his system of pre-established harmony in an effort to convince Lady Masham (and, in his deeper intentions, especially John Locke), the Lady adopts a less assertive and more inquisitive style, raising doubts and criticisms without offering fully alternative concepts to Leibniz's hypotheses.

However, it is worth noting that, alongside her ability to challenge her interlocutor and encourage him to explain his system in more analytical and detailed terms, Masham skillfully defends her father Ralph Cudworth's system against Bayle's attacks, effectively preventing any potential drift toward atheism. By sharing her apologetic views with Leibniz, she demonstrates familiarity with the hypothesis of plastic natures. Nonetheless, as Sarah Hutton observes, this does not necessarily imply her adherence to her father's Neoplatonic system¹⁰². Furthermore, it is not clear whether Damaris Masham shares the theological background from which Le Clerc perceives Cudworth's position as close to Arminianism, or at least compatible with it. This ambiguity further enhances the speculative depth of Masham's letters to Leibniz, reflecting her intellectual autonomy. She defends positions she does not fully endorse to assert a key truth: her father's system cannot, even unintentionally, promote atheism.

Finally, with regard to Masham's intellectual autonomy, it is worth noting that the last of her letters to Leibniz, the one we focused on in the previous section, is dated October 20, 1705. This indicates that it was written a year after the death of John Locke. This simple chronological observation raises doubts about the accuracy of Leibniz's claim that the noblewoman's pen was guided by the hand of the empiricist philosopher. After all, she herself writes to him, in a passage already cited earlier: «I onelie take the libertie briefly to suggest to

ongoing importance of recognizing the female philosopher as a distinct subject of study, see D. Giovannozzi and E.M. De Tommaso, *Sulla strada dell'inclusione: verso la ridondanza*, in D. Giovannozzi and E.M. De Tommaso (eds.), *Donne, filosofia della natura e scienza*, Rome 2024, pp. 5-12.

¹⁰¹ See particularly: S. Hutton, *Damaris Cudworth, lady Masham: Between Platonism and Enlightenment*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 1 (1), 1993, pp. 29-54; J. Broad, *Women Philosophers of Seventeenth Century*; J.G. Buickerood, *What Is It with Damaris, Lady Masham? The Historiography of One Early Modern Woman Philosopher*, «Locke Studies», 5, 2005, pp. 179-214.

¹⁰² See S. Hutton, *Damaris Masham, Ralph Cudworth and John Locke*, pp. 16, 31.

you my thoughts thereon to the end that I may learn from you how far they are right»¹⁰³.

Robert C. Sleight suggests that, since Masham does not feel comfortable in the position of a «thesis sustainer» in her correspondence with Leibniz, «the self-deprecatory remarks are genuine, even when they accompany well-thought-out philosophical reflection, including sharp, cutting criticism»¹⁰⁴. I must respectfully disagree with this interpretation. On the contrary, it seems to me that behind these expressions of modesty, which are part of a rhetorical strategy, there emerges a woman fully aware of her speculative abilities. Far from being inhibited, she confidently articulates her doubts and reservations toward her distinguished interlocutor. She appears as an intellectual confident enough not only to *dissent* from a genius like Leibniz, but also to *suggest* her own ideas to him.

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Abbreviations

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¹⁰³ GP III, p. 373.

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