A Philosophical Scandal

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A communication to the members of the Leibniz Society

Introduction

Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding* was not published in his lifetime. Completed at about the time Locke died, it lay out of sight for the remaining dozen years of Leibniz's life and for half a century more, being published for the first time in 1765 by R. E. Raspe. It was Kant's reading of Raspe's edition, according to scholars, that first opened him up to the Leibnizian influence that largely shaped his mature thought. I can believe it. The *New Essays*, for all its faults, is full of nourishing philosophical material. It's a pity about those sixty years in the bottom drawer.

For English readers who could not easily read Leibniz's rather ungainly French, The wait was more than two centuries longer. It came to an end last Spring when Cambridge University Press issued an English edition of the work prepared by Peter Remnant (of the University of British Columbia) and myself. We are not expert in French, and there are translation problems that we know we haven't fully solved; but we have made the principal content of this masterpiece of Leibniz's available, at last, to those whose only working knowledge is English.

The Langley Translation

My topic here is not the Remnant-Bennett version but its only predecessor—a translation by A. G. Langley, first published in 1898. It is scandalous that this ever saw the light of day, and even more so that it was reprinted. But the big scandal—the one I mean in my title—is the fact that it took so long for anything better to be offered, the fact that the work had to wait until 1981 before being put tolerably into English. Since it is a lengthy consideration of the greatest single masterpiece of English philosophy by one of the two greatest German philosophers, one would have expected the English-speaking philosophical world to care more. It's not that we have been making do well enough with the French, for the paucity of references to the *New Essays* in the English literature on Leibniz shows otherwise. The work has mainly been ignored—either not looked at, or read in the French and not understood, or read in Langley's version and judged to be negligible.

The badness of Langley's translation is remarkable. He seems to have known little French, and not to have heard of big dictionaries or of Frenchmen. His knowledge of philosophy must have been minimal. His English is written in a style that might be called 'scholarly illiterate', and often fails elementary grammatical tests. Above all, he seems to

have lacked that small inner voice which sometimes warns that one is making a fool of oneself.

Before his Leibnizian effort slides into oblivion, I want briefly to celebrate it for the members of the Leibniz Society, putting on record a few of its choicer infelicities. I haven't before had fun at Langley's expense, and I shan't do so again; but when I sent some Langleyisms to a French Canadian friend of mine, he wrote back that *Les 'paradoxes involontaires' de Langley m'ont mis l'esprit en fête*. It seems a pity not to cause joy in other hearts as well. If you like, what follows can also be taken in a spirit of *J'accuse*—a charge-sheet against the Anglophone philosophical world which for so long left Leibniz's masterpiece suffering in Langley's torture-chamber.

The French text

Remnant and I had the advantage of a good French text to work from—the one edited and published in 1962 under the auspices of the Berlin Academy. Looking at microfilms of Leibniz's manuscript, I have noticed two tiny differences between it and the Academy edition, on consecutive lines. But I am sure that that is coincidental bad luck, and that the Academy edition is mainly to be trusted. It is certainly much better than any of its predecessors.

The edition of the text that Langley followed (Gerhardt's) contains a horrendous switching of two adjacent passages, each several pages long, which creates three sense-destroying rips through the middles of sentences, as well as other clear signs of mishap. Langley doggedly 'translates' his way through all this, with absurd effect; but it would take too long to give the details. (The rips are at the join between pages 72 and 73 of Langley, at line 3 of his page 77, and at line 9 of his page 84.) Langley describes the switch with perfect accuracy, in a footnote, treating it as a *discrepancy* between Gerhardt's text and those of Erdmann and Jacques, and madly believing Gerhardt to be correct.

From now on in this article, page numbers will always be those of the Academy edition, which are also given in the edition of Remnant and Bennett.

One passage is defective in every edition before the Berlin Academy's. Dicussing the fact that something which is inherently intelligible may be hard for us to penetrate, Leibniz gives a homely analogy:

> 'It is sometimes hard to find the key to the confusion—the way of viewing <the object which shows one its intelligible properties; rather like those pictures that Father Niceron has shown how to construct, which must be viewed> from a special position or by means of a special mirror if one is to see what the artist was aiming at.' (p. 258)

All pre-1962 editions were based on a manuscript which omitted the portion I have angle-bracketed, thus creating for translators a problem that we were spared. I don't know how this was handled by most of the dozen other translations; but I know that the two principal German versions struggle through the passage without conjecturing that the text is corrupt. (We went to Ernst Cassirer's version for help with translation problems; we were never handed a solution on a plate. but were always conscious of being in the presence of a first-rate mind which was usually aware of the existence of a problem.) But I cannot believe that any other translator was reduced to such an abject condition by the corrupt text as Langley was. He writes:

> 'It is sometimes difficult to find the key, or the manner of looking at it from a certain point, either by the intervention of a certain mirror or glass in order to show the purpose of him who has caused the thing.'

Minor infelicities

Langley announced that he would forgo elegance of writing in the interests of plodding, literal accuracy. He made good on the first half of the undertaking. Where Leibniz says 'To resort to this bare faculty to do the work is to talk unintelligibly' (p. 140)—*et recourir pour cela à cette faculté nue c'est ne rien dire d'intelligible*—Langley has him saying 'And to recur for this purpose to this naked faculty is to speak nowise intelligibly'. This is one of hundreds of places where the clumsiness of the writing has no excuse. I shan't cite any others.

There are hosts of tiny sources of pleasure in Langley's translation. Some of them perhaps lie just within the bounds of normal scholarly mishap. For example, when Leibniz accuses a certain theory of implying that the universe is disorderly, that God made it *à batons rompus*—meaning that he made it higgledy-piggledy, or did the job in fit and starts—perhaps a translator could sanely think, as Langley evidently did, that Leibniz meant to accuse the theory of implying that God made the universe 'out of broken sticks'. And perhaps we should not blame him too much for rendering the statement that necessary truths are the 'inner core and mortar'—*l'âme et la liaison*—of all our thought as the pronouncement that necessary truths are 'the soul and the connection' of our thought (p. 84). But Langley goes beyond mere bad translation in a passage where Leibniz, illustrating the usefulness of textual scholarship, says that we have added to our medical knowledge by learning from ancient Greece, not only from Arabic accounts of Greek medicine but also by consulting 'the Greek originals'—*les originaux Grecs*—Langley has him saying that we have improved our knowledge by going back to 'the original Greeks'. (Langley was often defeated by the positioning of adjectives in French. Where he should have had Leibniz speaking of 'actual knowledge of necessary truths in the demonstrative sciences'—*la connaissance actuelle des véritées nécessaires dans les science démonstratives*—Langley has him speaking of 'actual knowledge of the truths necessary in the demonstrative sciences' (p. 86).) Even more striking than the posthumous consultation with 'the original Greeks' is what Langley does with a remark of Leibniz's that writing down some of the intermediate steps in a proof will help you to reconstruct the proof later on, like going on a journey and setting up mile-stones—*colonnes miliaires*—along the way, so that you or others can retrace your steps on a later occasion. Langley has him comparing it to going on a journey and stationing 'military columns in the midst of the road' (p. 424) What *can* he have thought Leibniz meant by this? He seems often to have humbly assumed that it wasn't for *him* to understand what was going on. That threw him back on mechanically plugging in word for word, as when Leibniz's statement that since we are beings, 'being is innate in us'—*l'être nous est inné*—becomes the gnomic remark that since we are beings, 'being we is innate'.

Many of Langley's mistakes can be corrected, with fair confidence, from the context. For example, when he makes Leibniz agree with Locke that 'There has never been any time in which nothing existed' on the grounds that 'If there had always been nothing, there would always have been nothing', the alert reader will suspect that Leibniz really said that if there had *ever* been nothing there would always have been nothing—and so he did: *Si jamais il y avait eu rien. . .* (p. 436)

Other mishaps lead to unconstruable results, but ones which don't in themselves matter much. Leibniz speaks of how we are saved from being troubled by excessively distinct sensations of objects 'which, necessary though they are to nature's plan, are not entirely agreeable to us' (p. 165) The

French is: '. . . *qui ne nous reviennent pas tout à fait, et dont la nature n'a pu se passer pour obtenir ses fins*. On this occasion, Langley was wholly defeated: '. . . which do not recur immediately and the nature of which could not go to obtain their ends'. Fortunately, the passage is of only minor importance.

It is immediately followed by more trouble. Leibniz writes: 'How many insects we swallow without being aware of it, how many people we observe who are inconvenienced by having too fine a sense of smell, and how many disgusting objects we would see if our eyesight were keen enough!' The French of the middle part of this is: . . . *combien voyons nous de personnes qui ayant l'odorat trop subtil en sont incommodées. . .* ,, which Langley renders by 'how many people we see who, having a too penetrating odor, are annoying. . . '. Someone who has no dictionary might be forgiven for thinking that *odorat* is odor; but the idea that *subtil* could mean 'penetrating' is harder to excuse; and the rendering of *en sont inccommodées* by 'are annoying' goes beyond all bounds.

Reversals of meaning

Sometimes Langley's ineptitude leads to an almost total reversal of Leibniz's meaning. I shall give two examples.

The first represents Leibniz as working with slipshod clumsiness on a point of importance. Like many philosophers and mathematicians before the 19th century, Leibniz denied that there could be an infinite number: his philosophy is full of infinities, but he is usually careful to keep the word 'number' away from them. Here, for example (from p. 157):

> 'There is an infinity of things, i.e. there are always more of them than one can specify. But there is no infinite number, nor any infinite line or other infinite quantity if these are taken to be genuine wholes.'

The French: *Il y a une infinité de choses . . . Mais il n'y a point de nombre infini. . . .* Langley: 'There is an infinite number of things . . . but there is no infinite number.'

Still worse is a mistranslation, stemming from Langley's not knowing what to make of the idiom . . . *ne laisser pas de faire* . . . , which reverses Leibniz's meaning right at the heart of his polemic concerning innately known truths. Leibniz insists that although some of our learning consists in truths' coming into our minds, some of it is a mere uncovering of truths that were already there. 'I cannot accept the proposition that whatever is learned is not innate,' he says, and adds: 'The truths about numbers are in us, but nevertheless we learn them' (p. 85). The French is: *Les vérités des nombres sont en nous, et on ne laisse pas de les apprendre.* Langley: 'The truths of numbers are in us, and we are not left to learn them.'

Meaning suppressions

On many occasions Leibniz says something really good and interesting which sinks into unintelligibility in Langley's version. I shall cite two of these.

In one of the places where Locke says, with the same sort of confidence that Descartes had about this, that a person cannot think without being aware of it, Leibniz makes an important rejoinder. To be entitled to maintain that, he says, 'you must show that it is of the essence of thought in particular that one be aware of it' (p. 113). The French: . . . *il faut montrer, de la pensée particulièrement, qu'il lui est essentiel qu'on s'en aperçoive.* Langley: '. . . it is necessary to point out in particular the thought that it is essential to it that it be perceived.'

My second example of meaning-squashing extravagantly makes nonsense of one of my favourite bits of the *New*

Essays, a little-noticed *jeu d'esprit* which is worth exhibiting quite apart from its role as one of Langley's victims.

A number of philosophers, have tended to run together two enormously different sorts of truth: **(i)** first-person present-tense psychological statements ('I am thinking about lunch') and **(ii)** elementary truths of logic ('A right-angled triangle has three sides'). What tempted Locke to conflate these was the combined force of a fact and a pseudo-fact. The genuine fact is just that each sort of truth seems to be especially *secure* or *safe* in some way: if you wanted examples of things you could say with minimal risk of error, either of those sorts of propositions would serve. The pseudo-fact is that each can be known in the same way, namely by inspecting one's 'ideas'. Locke could believe this because he regularly used 'idea' to cover **(i)** mental episodes such as a bit of brooding about lunch and **(ii)** abstract items like the concept of a triangle. Leibniz repeatedly takes Locke to task for this, and he himself reserved *idée* for **(ii)** the abstract conceptual item, while refering to **(i)** as *images* or *sentiments*. He is in no danger of running the two sorts of safe truths together.

But he is aware that they have something in common—something to do with safety or security or basicness—which he expresses by calling **(i)** 'the first truths of fact' and **(ii)** 'the first truths of reason'. It is typical of Leibniz that he should want to explain what this shared primacy is in a formula which also brings out how the two differ. He says: 'Each can be called "immediate"—the former because nothing comes between the understanding and its object, the latter because nothing comes between the subject and the predicate.' (p.434)

It won't do, I am afraid: Leibniz comes to grief here because of his assumption that all basic truth has the subject-predicate form; for if that is dropped there no finger-hold left for his 'nothing comes between' notion, which was supposed to link elementary logical truth with the sort of immediate self-knowledge in which the mind comes hard up against a datum such as its own thought about lunch.

Still, it was a good try, and its typically Leibnizian combination of profundity and elegance gives pleasure. But not in Langley's version. Here is the French: *[Elles] peuvent être appelés immédiates: celles-là parce qu'il y a immédiation entre l'entendement et son objet; celles-ci parce qu'il y a immédiation entre the sujet et le* predicatum. Langley: 'Both . . . may be called immediate; the former because they are immediate between the understanding and its object; the latter, because they are intermediate between the subject and the predicate.' Thus a phrase that literally means 'there is immediacy' is rendered once by 'they are immediate' and once by 'they are intermediate'—and this in one of Leibniz's loveliest plays of the intellect.

Wiener's version

I have never read much of the Langley version: it is through occasional dippings that I have found dozens of mistakes of which I have here reported a few choice ones. Presumably there are hundreds.

Langley's translation has not infected the sound translation of the Preface of the *New Essays* in the Everyman collection edited by Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson. But Langley was clearly the basis for the translation of one-sixth of the work that appears in Philip Wiener's collection published by Scribner's. I haven't read all of this either, but for purposes of this report I have searched it for the passages I have highlighted here. Half a dozen of them don't occur in Wiener. Of the remaining eight, Wiener corrects three (*odorat*, *infinité*, *immédiation*) and half-corrects a fourth

(about objects which are necessary to nature's ends); in three others he follows Langley into error ('soul and connection', 'the thought that it is essential to it', 'truths necessary in the demonstrative sciences'); and there is one where he changes Langley's wording while exactly preserving his error, altering 'If there had always been nothing' to 'I there had never been anything'. This sampling suggests that Wiener's general level of accuracy, in the *New Essays* part of his anthology, is not high. Besides that, his selections inherit much of Langley's infelicity of style, as well as being so fragmentary as to be hard to learn from. A new English edition of the whole work was clearly needed.

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Addendum (2013): One reviewer of the Remnant-Bennett edition said that people using it should have the Langley at hand for use in cases where they want to know what Leibniz really said. The review appeared in *Dialogue* 21 (1983) at pages 593–596.