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BOOK REVIEW

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Mogens Lærke: *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genése d'une opposition complexe.* Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008, pp. 1092. €165.00 (hb.). ISBN 978-2-7453-1698-1

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Spinoza was a great philosopher and a highly original metaphysician. He was also a radical and unsettling thinker whose views were perceived as scandalous, heretical and dangerous. Spinoza was seen as a threat, especially to established religion and its authority in society. Because he was such a highly influential and controversial figure, the way he was perceived by his contemporaries is of great interest. One of the most remarkable minds in Europe at the time, and one who had a particularly curious combination of fascination and repugnance to Spinoza's views, was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.¹

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Leibniz, who was one the most important contributors to the formation of modern science was also a firm conservative, a man fully committed to the reconciliation of the new science and the discoveries of human reason with the accepted doctrines of Christianity and established traditions. Thus, while Spinoza advocated philosophy and its geometrical method as the only norm of truth, Leibniz sought to reconcile philosophy with revealed religion and believed that their results must be consistent. In fact, much of Leibniz' enormous intellectual energies were devoted precisely to this reconciliatory project. While being himself a great innovator in the sciences and in philosophy, Leibniz assumed the role of a traditional theologian, showing how reason can be made consistent with faith. It is this role of the theologians that Spinoza's philosophy despises the most, as it attempts to provide rational justification to human superstition and prejudice.

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If only for this reason, one would expect Leibniz to be in clear and vehement opposition to Spinoza. Indeed, such an opposition can be found in Leibniz's reactions to Spinoza; but, as Mogens Lærke's monumental study demonstrates, this opposition is far more complex and nuanced than one would expect or that has been recognized thus far. The task Lærke sets himself is to study the genealogy of Leibniz's opposition to Spinoza in full detail, examining the repercussions of his various encounters with Spinoza – his texts, letters and acquaintances – and turning every stone in search of evidence that can throw any light on this complex story of encounters. In particular, Lærke attempts to avoid any of the prejudices or ideological bents that have contaminated the study of this relationship in the past. Lærke's study excels in executing this task to the highest degree. There is, indeed, hardly any stone that remains unturned through the 1,092 pages of

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this careful and comprehensive study. There is also no succumbing to a grand thesis or to a facile conceptualization of these encounters.

In the first part of the study, Leibniz's opposition to Spinoza is nuanced by exposing different attitudes towards the theological-political aspect of Spinoza's work when he read and reread the *Tractatus-theologico-politicus* (TTP) in 1670–1 and again in late 1675. This includes attempts to reconstruct Leibniz's stand with regard to Spinoza's conception of theological questions such as the existence of miracles, the nature of true religion and the method for interpreting of Scripture. It also includes discussions of problems in political philosophy such as the foundations of natural right and the relations between church and state.

Next, Lærke turns to Leibniz' attitude towards Spinoza's metaphysics. Spinoza's position was gradually exposed to him during the latter part of his stay in Paris, in 1675–6, when he met and discussed Spinoza's philosophy with Spinoza's friend and follower Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus. Elaborating mainly on suggestions originally made by Mark Kulstad, Lærke argues that these exchanges prompted Leibniz to engage seriously with Spinozistic ideas in the set of metaphysical fragments known as the *De summa rerum*. Lærke argues that, for several months during this period, Leibniz in effect holds a quasi-Spinozist system.

Although he had already learned about aspects of Spinoza's philosophy during this early period in Paris, Leibniz only had the opportunity to study in detail the *Ethics* in 1678 after Spinoza's *Opera postuma* had been published towards the end of 1677. Leibniz's reception of this publication is the object of the following part of the book. Lærke analyses Leibniz' critical comments on Spinoza with regard to the use of language in philosophy, the nature of substance and modes, the existence of God, and the necessity or contingency of the world. In addition, Lærke also attempts to reconstruct what Spinoza's response to Leibniz' comments might have been.

According to Lærke's account, the 1678 reading of the *Ethics* constitutes the main turning point in his attitude towards Spinoza. After 1679, Leibniz's opposition is fully formed and becomes a straightforward and complete rejection. In fact, it appears that he never reread Spinoza after that date. This lack of direct engagement with Spinoza's texts in Leibniz's later comments has led commentators such as Georges Friedmann to speak of his attitude towards Spinoza as lacking both nuance and textual basis. According to Lærke, however, Leibniz' later writings testify to a change of strategy in dealing with this dangerous thinker, whom the German philosopher now attempts to 'master' and 'tame' through a series of comparative interpretations of Spinoza's work, in relation to Cartesianism, cabballism and the moderate form of scepticism defended by Pierre Bayle.

Thus, to summarize the story about Leibniz and Spinoza told by Lærke, the young Leibniz seeks to refute the views expressed in the TTP, though he has high esteem for the erudition of its author and finds himself metaphysically curious about Spinoza in 1672–6. Once Leibniz reads the

Ethics, his curiosity turns sour. He comes to see that Spinoza's metaphysics and his political theology form one inseparable whole – an extremely repugnant one, even to his creative mind. Leibniz, who has a remarkable knack of using every conceptual thread and every insight for his grand reconciliatory project, finds nothing to borrow, nothing to modify, nothing to use in Spinoza's system – and a total rejection ensues.

So much for the overall thesis of *Leibniz Lecteur de Spinoza*. Let me now briefly consider Lærke's discussion of Leibniz' reading notes on Spinoza's *Ethics* from 1678. Lærke presents and discusses these notes in great detail. His discussion is comprehensive, insightful and illuminating. It also greatly enriches the book in comparing the way Leibniz has read Spinoza with what Lærke regards as 'the true system of Spinoza' (993). The result is a rich discussion of the philosophical opposition between Leibniz and Spinoza. However, Lærke argues that, generally speaking, Leibniz has not engaged the true Spinoza in dialogue but rather, something of a '*créature méconnaissable*' (993). In his conclusion, Lærke argues that Leibniz' detailed criticisms of some of Spinoza's propositions and their alleged proofs do not even address the true system of Spinoza but only Leibniz' misconception of Spinoza ('son Spinoza' (993)). According to Lærke, in a certain sense, Leibniz cannot even be regarded as an anti-Spinozist because he does not 'master' the peculiar form of reasoning that governs Spinoza's thought. Leibniz, thus, does not object to Spinoza's true philosophy but to his own translations of it. Since Leibniz misread Spinoza's *Ethics* in this way, it goes without saying that his critical remarks are off the mark.

Lærke's conclusion concerning these notes raises some interesting questions of both method and substance. For example, I find the claim that Leibniz could not grasp the form of reasoning that governs Spinoza's thought exaggerated. Is it not the case that Leibniz has made some good objections to Spinoza's reasoning and metaphysical system? The problems of ambiguity and obscurity he is pointing out in the *Ethics* seem to me real and in fact are probably bound to arise in any attempt to formalize philosophy. The difficulty arises with the very definition of terms that have their origin in natural languages in a precise formal fashion (Lærke addresses some aspects of this difficulty in his section on 'Language and its use' (593–624)). Unlike what Lærke's conclusion suggests, I think that Leibniz's critical remarks are helping to expose some of the inherent difficulties in Spinoza's metaphysics and in the enterprise of doing philosophy *more geometrico*.

Thus, I remain unconvinced by Lærke's point that Leibniz does not criticize Spinoza but only his own Spinoza. After all, how is one to read and criticize any system or text other than according to the way one understands it? I doubt that anyone has a better theory of what understanding a certain philosopher means other than to engage his text in a critical discussion. And isn't this what Leibniz does, sometimes more successfully and sometimes less so? If I could amend Lærke's conclusion, I would add that there is another

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strand, as important to Leibniz's reading of Spinoza, namely that it is precisely because Leibniz sees through Spinoza's system that he attempts to present a philosophical system that avoids its consequences (such as the moral neutrality of the world). It is precisely because he reads and understands Spinoza in the context of the seventeenth century that he is urged to enhance his own system as an alternative. Such an observation would surely not make the opposition between Spinoza and Leibniz less complex; rather, it would slightly modify the complexity Lærke has so convincingly exposed and would amend his somewhat imbalanced conclusion. Moreover, I also think that this modified conclusion only increases the interest and profit one can draw from Lærke's detailed analysis. After all, Leibniz' and Spinoza's remain the two great systems after Descartes. As Lærke's book shows, there is still much to be learned from a detailed comparison of their texts and the context of their opposition. If my review has not made this out, let me state explicitly that no Spinoza or Leibniz scholar can afford to ignore a book as informative and stimulating as this one.

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