

Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

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Maria Rosa Antognazza's biography fills, splendidly, one of the major gaps in the literature on Leibniz. It is a magisterial scholarly biography, richly documented with copious citations of the original texts now available. But more than that, it is a narrative that makes psycho-social as well as intellectual sense of Leibniz's life and work as a unified, and largely consistent, whole, despite the great diversity of his projects and intellectual interests, and the frustrating absence of any adequate grand synthesis of Leibniz's thought from his own pen.

In her introduction to the biography, Antognazza spells out the following "four basic, underlying theses of the work." First, "that Leibniz's life and work needs to be assessed as a whole." A biography that followed only his work in philosophy, mathematics, and physics, ignoring his practical activities, his work as a lawyer and legal theorist, his labors as a historian, and his other intellectual interests, as well as the many dimensions of his historical context, would not make appropriate sense of his life as a whole. Second, "that this whole was a remarkably unified one ... unified by a small number of basic principles and objectives, and that everything was connected with everything else." Third, "that the most basic of these unifying principles and aspirations were established remarkably early" and that "Leibniz preserved and pursued his original vision with remarkable tenacity." Fourth, that "these distinctive commitments ... were deeply rooted in the environment of his native country." Antognazza holds that "Leibniz was in essence a German philosopher—or, far more precisely and adequately, a philosopher of the Holy Roman Empire" (8-9). In this review I will comment on the biography in relation, first, to the fourth of these basic theses, and then, at greater length, in relation to the second of them.

That Leibniz's life should be understood as a German life is not a new thought; certainly it is not new to German scholars. Antognazza is right, however, in suggesting that there has been some temptation "to portray Leibniz as a progressive Westerner stranded in a [central European] intellectual backwater," and in replying that it was precisely the political and ecclesiastical conditions of the Holy Roman Empire that inspired Leibniz's aspirations, adding that "it was these aspirations

which sharply distinguished Leibniz from most of his western European intellectual contemporaries” (9-10). This is most obviously true, perhaps, of the aspiration for reunion of the Christian churches, an aspiration that had a constituency and a political relevance in the Empire in a way that it did not in the West, and which played a part in shaping so much of what Leibniz said (and avoided saying in many contexts) about metaphysics as well as theology.

I found Antognazza’s treatment of the German context especially illuminating in the first chapter of the biography, which treats Leibniz’s childhood and education, and its background, up to his leaving his native Leipzig at the age of twenty, never to return except for brief visits. Her detailed account of the cultural and religious situation in Leipzig in that time, and particularly of the intolerant rigidity of the version of Lutheranism that prevailed there, and the contrast between that atmosphere and Leibniz’s youthful intellectual explorations, does much to illuminate his early and decisive abandonment of his native city and its Upper Saxon region. It also helps the reader to recognize the desire for a more open and tolerant religious atmosphere (which he found in Catholic Mainz and Lutheran Hanover) as an early (and I would say permanent) motive in Leibniz’s life choices.

Antognazza’s development of her second basic thesis, that Leibniz’s life was “remarkably unified” around his “basic principles and objectives” expresses a view of him that is clearly favorable and admiring. In reading I sometimes wondered whether she was giving him too much benefit of the doubt; but for the most part I think she succeeds in vindicating her admiration. “Remarkably unified,” of course, does not mean *totally* unified; for even the most unified human lives contain some choices that do not fit very well, and some interests and activities that are at most loosely related to the main projects. That Leibniz too had some mundane interests that did not spring from his grand vision—interests, for example, in his own financial and social position—is evident enough in Antognazza’s narrative, and hardly surprising even in a remarkably unified life.

More interesting, I think, are potential objections to Antognazza’s unity thesis that she presumably has in view in saying that it “assumes for heuristic purposes that the last universal genius was no fool, that Leibniz was not a bad judge of which options, amongst those actually available to him, were most likely to advance his central projects” (9). That seems reasonable as a rebuttable heuristic presumption, but the verdict indicated by the biography in the end is mixed. The narrative does contain evidence that Leibniz was a poor judge of some things about his projects. In particular, as one would expect, it contains evidence that he was a poor judge of

the likelihood that he would complete them. Having quoted the Hanoverian ambassador in Vienna in 1713 as concluding a description of Leibniz with the words, “he has either no talent or no inclination to pull anything together and bring it to a close,” Antognazza remarks, “There is no denying the accuracy of this character sketch” (490).

Her narrative presents quite a number of instances of his failure to complete projects. Prominent among these are two major books, his *Dynamics* and *New Essays*, which he did not get published though they were finished or practically as good as finished. Discussing the *New Essays*, Antognazza comments, “As on numerous previous occasions, one cannot but be astonished at Leibniz’s ability to turn his back on even his most polished and significant manuscripts” (413). Yet I think she does provide a framework in which we can see even this “ability” as fitting in the unity of Leibniz’s life, inasmuch as his “basic principles and objectives” did not lead him to care about publication in the way that most of us who now write about him care about it. As she remarks, “Leibniz was a man who, more than anything else, wanted to *do* certain things” (5). Disseminating his ideas was for him a social act, intended to be socially useful, and could lose its appeal when the social context changed.

Nonetheless it is clear that there were at least two major projects that Leibniz left incomplete, not because they had lost their usefulness, but because he had underestimated how much it would take to finish them, or overestimated how much he could do. One of them, of course, was his history of the Guelf family, whose unfinished state was the bane of his last years. The other was his central, overarching intellectual project, “the dream,” as Antognazza calls it, “of recalling the multiplicity of human knowledge to a logical, metaphysical, and pedagogical unity, centred on the theistic vision of the Christian tradition and aimed at the common good” (6). It is one of the strengths of her biography that she keeps the reader abreast of the forms that this dream assumed, and what Leibniz was doing about it, in successive periods of his life (79, 233-41, 480-82). It remains evident, however, that the more comprehensive the intellectual project became, and the more its achievement came to depend on enlisting the labors of legions of members of academic societies, the surer it became that Leibniz would not be able to accomplish it. And the difficulty of finishing these major projects was aggravated by “hyperactivity” that was largely “of his own doing” (321; cf. 171).

Antognazza’s Leibniz biography will long remain an indispensable work for students of “the last universal genius.” We will turn, and return, to it for its illuminat-

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ing placement of so many of his works in their historic contexts, for its diachronic perspectives on many strands in his thought, but most of all for its unequaled portrait of the multifaceted yet very coherent human being who produced the works.

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