

Mogens Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza: La genèse d'une opposition complexe*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008. Pp. 1095.

Reviewed by Maria Rosa Antognazza, King's College London

With this massive, painstakingly researched, and lucidly argued study, Mogens Lærke leaves no stone unturned in his critical discussion of the complex encounter of Leibniz with Spinoza. Not only does he examine all the sources; he also engages with the key secondary literature in French, English, German, and Italian. Lærke knows that in taking up the challenge of re-evaluating the relationship between the philosophical thought of these two towering early modern thinkers he is entering a mine field. Interpretations of their relationship range from seeing their philosophical systems as incompatible to considering Leibniz's philosophy as a variant of Spinozism. Between these starkly opposed views are a number of more nuanced positions: one, for instance, acknowledges Leibniz's use in some cases of a Spinozist vocabulary but points out the substantive difference of what Leibniz means by it, another recognises Leibniz's explicit opposition to Spinozism but doubts its sincerity, while a third recognizes the sincerity of Leibniz's opposition but concludes that he was ultimately unsuccessful in presenting a philosophical system which avoids Spinozism on key issues.

Lærke carefully but assuredly negotiates his way in this treacherous territory guided by explicit methodological choices. Although he does not deny the legitimacy of an analysis of the evolution of Leibniz's thought "centred" on what remains constant in it, he vindicates the fecundity (especially in the case at hand) of the approach which follows with equal interest "peripheral" developments. This does not mean that discontinuity as opposed to continuity should be privileged but that discontinuities have something important to contribute to the whole story and should not be neglected or easily dismissed. The main aim of his contribution is not to reconstruct the genesis of Leibniz's philosophy in general but to offer "an historiographical analysis of the refraction of the thought of Spinoza in that of Leibniz" (p. 73) following an approach both "comparative and genetic". As a result Lærke takes us on a fascinating journey of discovery and polemical engagement of Leibniz with Spinoza without any short-cuts, any hint of partisanship, or – as one would expect in a serious evaluation – any caricatured clashes between courtiers and heretics.

The structure of the book is complex as is the encounter of Leibniz with Spinoza. Lærke, however, once again guides the reader through a dense forest of texts and events by means of helpful sign-posting in the introductions and conclusions to the main sections. The volume is organized around three main dimensions of Leibniz's engagement with Spinoza while at the same time following in broadly chronological order its main phases. The first dimension is represented by Leibniz's reaction to Spinoza's theological-political doctrines as expounded in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Leibniz's repeated reading of the TTP in 1671 and 1675 is examined in three thematic "blocks": Leibniz's opposition to Spinoza's "naturalism", to his "contractualism", and to his "libertinism". In so doing, Lærke discusses and compares Leibniz and Spinoza's interpretation of miracles, their views on the nature of true religion, the foundations of natural law, the *jus circa sacra*, and the principles of biblical exegesis. Although the analysis is not always as clear as it might have been – for instance in its sliding between miracles and mysteries without a firmer sense of the difference between these two categories (pp. 154-158) – Lærke reaches a number of illuminating conclusions. Notwithstanding Leibniz's admiration for Spinoza's learning, underneath some (often superficial) similarities Lærke exposes "fundamental differences" between Leibniz and Spinoza's views on this cluster of theological and political questions. For instance, with regard to their common appeal to historical analysis in the method of biblical exegesis, Lærke points out that "the appeal to history in Spinoza is a function of determining the *meaning* of Scripture, whereas in Leibniz it aims at establishing the *authentic* text. These two questions of meaning and authenticity should not be confused, since the first corresponds to a hermeneutic which secularizes the author of the biblical text while the other corresponds to a hermeneutic which maintains the inspiration of Scripture" (p. 350). Moreover, Lærke interestingly distinguishes the "minimal sufficient faith [foi minimale suffisante]" proposed by Spinoza's reduction of the content of Scripture to a small number of easily graspable doctrines (the *religio catholica* of chapter XIV of the TPP) from Leibniz's refusal to "thin" the doctrinal content of Scripture while admitting, at the same time, the sufficiency for faith of a confused understanding of the meaning of dogmas and, therefore, the legitimacy of a plurality of interpretations. In Lærke's pregnant phrase, Leibniz does not favour "a *minimal sufficient faith* but rather a *minimal sufficient intelligibility of faith*" (p. 351; see also p. 355). Even more importantly, Lærke alerts the reader to the fact that Spinozism does not really correspond to the categories of "naturalism",

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“contractualism,” and “libertinism” under which it is rejected by Leibniz. In other words, the “Spinoza” rejected is *Leibniz’s* Spinoza.

The second dimension is metaphysical, and is in turn divided into two main phases: the transitional period corresponding, roughly, to the Parisian years (1672-1676); and the first years in Hanover (1676-1679). During his formative stay in Paris, Leibniz re-encounters Spinoza’s thought, this time in the form of a sympathetic account of Spinoza’s metaphysics provided by an insider to Spinoza’s circle, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus. Tschirnhaus is not permitted to show to his German friend the manuscript of the *Ethics* but does not refrain from discussing it with him. Leibniz is intrigued and tempted by this version of Spinoza’s metaphysics mediated by Tschirnhaus to the point of sketching what Lærke labels a “quasi-Spinozist” metaphysical system in some of the texts and fragments collectively known as *De Summa Rerum – quasi-Spinozist* because Leibniz bends some of Spinoza’s theses to fit a different mould in which, for instance, there is still space for finalism. This period of benevolent metaphysical curiosity in which Leibniz flirts with Spinozist metaphysical doctrines as possible tools he could use to construct his own system does not last long. Once removed to Hanover, away from Tschirnhaus and more daring experimentations, the honeymoon is over and the marriage of his views with Spinozist metaphysical doctrines fairly rapidly descends into divorce, sealed in 1678 by the first-hand reading of the *Ethics* finally published in the *Opera Posthuma*. Lærke follows in detail the reading of the *Opera Posthuma*, and especially (but not only) of the *Ethics*, discussing the major themes tackled by Leibniz in his critical commentaries: the constantly repeated accusation of obscurity; the issue of language and its use; the notions of substance and *causa sui*; the attributes; the existence of God; causality; the divine intellect; the concepts of possibility, reality and perfection; and the problems of contingency, necessity and freedom. Lærke concludes by arguing that the apparent proximities which can be detected between the metaphysical views of the two philosophers, reveal themselves upon closer scrutiny as masking “profound differences” that ultimately separate the two philosophers in an “irreducible way” (p. 847). So there is, in his view, an insurmountable opposition between their two philosophies since they constitute two systems “built upon systemic intuitions and conceptual fabrics completely foreign to one another” (p. 847). One cannot, however, hastily declare Leibniz’s victory in his intellectual duel with Spinoza for the simple reason that “Leibniz’s Spinoza is not Spinoza”. According to Lærke, Leibniz’s critical commentaries in

fact reveal “a deep incomprehension of the way of reasoning which governs the philosophical system of Spinoza” (p. 846), a sort of dialogue in which Leibniz remains ultimately deaf to what Spinoza is really saying.

The third dimension becomes especially apparent from 1679 onward in Leibniz’s “comparative strategy” of Spinozism with other doctrines as a way to gain a firmer “grip” on his slippery adversary which, pinned down in one form, seems for ever able to shape shift and live on under a different form. After 1679 Leibniz ceases to read Spinoza but by all means does not cease to engage with his doctrines. If anything, he seems to be haunted by them and by a profound urge to refute Spinozism, warn against it, defend views he approves of from the charge of Spinozism, and so on. In Lærke’s phrase, all of these moves can be subsumed under Leibniz’s attempt to “tame” Spinozism. Lærke explores in particular three examples of Leibniz’s comparative strategy: the comparison of Spinozism with Cartesianism; the comparison of Spinozism with the Kabbalah; and the evaluation in the *Theodicy* of Pierre Bayle’s account of Spinozism in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. As regards Cartesianism, while recognising that “Descartes and Spinoza clearly disagree [Cartesius et Spinoza plane dissentiunt]”, Leibniz reads Spinoza as a kind of hyper-Cartesian who over-stretches Cartesian doctrines and “systematically chooses the worse solution to the problems posed by Descartes’s philosophy” (p. 920). Likewise, Leibniz charges ahead, Spinoza manages to put the worse possible complexion on the Kabbalah. As for Bayle, his denunciation of Spinoza’s fatalism rings hollow to Leibniz’s ears since Bayle himself “confused what is certain with what is necessary when he claimed that the choice of the best made things necessary” (*Theodicy*, § 169).

Lærke’s general conclusion seems to me judicious. Many of the questions raised by the comparison of Leibniz and Spinoza’s philosophical systems do not have a clear-cut answer. At least one, however, does have in his view a definitive answer: the question of whether Leibniz tacitly pillaged Spinoza’s system without acknowledging his debt. Leibniz did not dissimulate. From an historiographical point of view “there is nothing which allow us to conclude that his mature system ‘hides’ a secret Spinozism, or that he has borrowed any matter from Spinoza without acknowledging it” (p. 992). In short, “the mature Leibniz is a sincere adversary of Spinozism” (p. 992). Many other questions, however, remain open – or, more precisely, they remain unanswered because close analysis of the encounter of Leibniz with Spinoza unveils that these questions were not properly formulated to start with. For instance, the vexed question of whether Leibniz was influenced

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by Spinozism does not have a short answer and should rather be formulated as a complex set of questions distinguishing between a negative and a positive influence of different versions of Spinozism in different periods.

It follows from Lærke's own conclusion that the relations between Leibniz and Spinoza will continue to be a matter of debate and some readers may well continue to draw different consequences from the enormous wealth of material carefully assembled and discussed by Lærke. Whatever the differences in interpretation, however, none of these debates can now fail to engage with this masterful study, which displays an impressive command of two of the most challenging and powerful systems of thought.

Maria Rosa Antognazza  
Department of Philosophy  
King's College London  
Strand, London WC2R 2LS -- UK  
maria.rosa.antognazza@kcl.ac.uk