

Reply to Cees Leijenhorst's Review of *Leibniz's Metaphysics*

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In his thoughtful and generous review of my book, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development*, Cees Leijenhorst accepts many of its most radical conclusions: that Leibniz's metaphysics evolved out of an attempt to combine ideas gathered from the great philosophers of the past and to do so in a manner that would solve the theological, legal, and philosophical questions that most concerned him; that although Leibniz's notion of substance developed out of his interpretation of the philosophy of Aristotle, his conception of the relation between God and creatures (and therefore his account of universal harmony) has its roots in the Platonism that he learned as a young man in Leipzig and Jena; that the views constituting the core doctrines of the mature philosophy (including a version of preestablished harmony) were conceived by the time Leibniz went to Paris in early 1672; and that Leibniz rejects the reality of passive extended matter and embraces his own version of idealism as early as 1671. I am tempted to respond with a loud rodeo yell and end it at that. But because the few points on which Leijenhorst and I disagree (however slightly) concern some of the most severe problems that face the early modern historian, I am eager to take the opportunity to discuss these problems here.

A major part of *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* is given over to the Platonist and Aristotelian assumptions that Leibniz learned as a young man and then used as the raw materials for his philosophy. I was motivated to distinguish between Aristotelianism and Platonism in the way that I did because Leibniz and his teachers did. But any such distinction is problematic. Appropriately, Leijenhorst worries about the fact that "Mercer's book appears to use the labels 'Platonism' and 'Aristotelianism' in a rather essentialist way."

To distinguish between Aristotelianism and Platonism, especially in the early modern period, is problematic in several ways. Already in late antiquity, followers of Plato and Aristotle assumed that these philosophies were in fundamental agreement. Important commentators like Porphyry (c.232-c.306) proposed a Platonism that was thoroughly mixed with Aristotelianism. This sort of Aristotelianized Platonism formed the intellectual background to medieval Europe, and informed the theological and doctrinal commitments of the early Christian church. When Renaissance and early modern thinkers turn to Augustine, they are

thereby imbibing a Christianized Platonism that is mixed with Aristotelianism. Moreover, as recent scholarship has shown, the Aristotelianism imported to Europe from the Arab world in the thirteenth century was itself tainted with Platonism. Scholasticism resulted from the blending together of this Platonized Aristotelianism and medieval Christianity (itself rooted in Platonism). Besides the fact that most scholastics based their interpretations of Aristotle's texts on Latin translations, there were a number of pseudo-Aristotelian works, some of which were thoroughly Platonic (e.g., *Liber de causis*). Thus, despite the philosophical subtlety of many scholastic thinkers and despite their commitment to the Philosopher, they promulgated an Aristotelianism that had been mixed with a good deal of Platonism. Finally, it is an awkward truth about prominent Platonists (e.g., Plotinus, Ficino) that they put forward elaborate theories that are sometimes only remotely connected to the texts of the Athenian philosopher himself. The obvious moral to the story is that one should avoid any attempt to draw clear boundaries between Platonism and Aristotelianism: the histories of these traditions are just too thoroughly intermingled.

Unfortunately, this is not a lesson that students of early modern thought can afford to follow. From the time of the early humanists through the seventeenth century, there are important philosophers in search of the "real Aristotle" and the "real Plato"; and there are plenty of thinkers who believe they are uniquely able to identify the truth in Platonism and distinguish that from the truth (or falsity) in Aristotle. Seventeenth-century German philosophers seem particularly eager first to distinguish and then combine the truth of these "most prominent schools."¹ Whether it is the pansophist Johann Heinrich Alsted or the more discriminating conciliatory eclectic Johann Christoph Sturm, German Protestant thinkers were keen to combine doctrines which they identified as Platonist with those considered Aristotelian. The cluster of doctrines that I describe in my book as Platonist is just the group that we find identified with Platonism among such German philosophers.

Scholars have yet to trace in detail the intertwining paths of Platonism and Aristotelianism in the early modern period. Since there is still so much to learn, we will surely have to revisit and revise any hypothesis offered about these and other traditions (e.g., Stoicism). I propose the following as a working hypothesis: there is a group of doctrines (e.g., causal emanation, and the other doctrines presented in my Chapter 5) such that when they are accepted by a philosopher, then it is fair to place that philosopher within the Platonist tradition. The same goes for Aristotelianism. But we should think of this list of doctrines as a case of

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family resemblance and not as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. To embrace emanation is not to be a Platonist but to stand in that tradition; to conceive an individual substance as constituted of form and matter does not a full-blooded Aristotelian make. When we accept this working hypothesis, we seem to obtain the right results. It turns out that Aquinas stands in the Platonist tradition although most of his fundamental doctrines are recognizably Aristotelian, and that Ficino has one foot firmly within the Aristotelian camp although he mostly engages in developing the doctrines of “the divine Plato.” In the case of philosophers like Aquinas, it is noteworthy that he was unaware that the views of the master came packaged with traces of other philosophical traditions. By the seventeenth century, sometimes the problem of packaging had been sorted out (e.g., Averroes’ Aristotle was known to be tainted), though often not (e.g., the Stoicism in Plotinus’ thought had not been identified).

Nor does Leijenhorst himself avoid essentialism. He disagrees with my description of Leibniz’s original notion of substance as Aristotelian because “it lacks perhaps the most essential Aristotelian ingredient, namely, the fact that bodies have an internal *phusis* that forms their active principles and explanation of their essential features?” But I see no reason to be so committed to specific ingredients of Aristotelianism. While Leibniz’s original notion of substance lacks its own internal source of activity, Leibniz nonetheless insists on calling his notion Aristotelian and broadcasting it as such. He feels justified in calling it Aristotelian because it has (what he considers) an Aristotelian structure: a passive principle and an active principle (supplied by God in this case) which constitute a self-sufficient corporeal substance. Leibniz was thoroughly familiar with the Aristotelian notion of *phusis*, but he chose not to include it in his original notion of substance. As it turns out, he found a problem with this original conception and changed it in significant ways. Although the result of these changes is a notion of substance that has much more in common with the views of the historic Aristotle, this does not mean that he had a “naïve” understanding of Aristotle and then managed to become more sophisticated.² That is, there is no essence of Aristotelianism that he was struggling to instantiate. Rather, one rather small subset of Aristotelian assumptions suited his philosophical needs in 1668-69, and then a larger subset did. Although Leibniz describes himself as an Aristotelian, Leijenhorst wants us to believe that he does so “only in order to cloak an essentially mechanical story.” But why shouldn’t we take Leibniz at his word and assume that, however strange it may seem to us, he intended to combine as much of the truth of Aristotle with as much of the truth of mechanism as he

could?

The lesson here is important: before we boldly insist on a particular doctrine as essential to Aristotelianism, Platonism, or any other philosophical tradition, we need to work as hard as we can to discern the intentions of the philosopher who uses the relevant designation. The more we learn about the complicated history of philosophy, the more it becomes obvious that there are no “essential ingredients.” Rather, there are doctrines that rearrange themselves into slightly different (and sometimes surprising) clusters over time. For those of us interested in early modern philosophy, the situation is even more complicated: some philosophers proclaim their rejection of a tradition (say, Aristotelianism) while making use of some of its doctrines, while others identify with a school (say, Aristotelianism) and then sneak ideas contrary to that tradition in the back door.³ To make matters worse, the period is full of philosophers who believed that the real views of Aristotle had been perverted by the scholastics and who therefore felt justified in reinterpreting the views of the ancient, sometimes in mechanical terms. Whether it was the English Catholic, Kenelm Digby, or the German mathematician, Erhard Weigel, or Leibniz’s contemporary, Johann Christoph Sturm, the assumption was that the new philosophy offered insight into the real views of Aristotle. One advantage to thinking about Aristotelianism and Platonism (and Stoicism, and so on) in family resemblance terms is that we can thereby avoid attributing bad-faith to so many historical figures. I would rather conclude that Leibniz, Digby, and Sturm had a loose sense of ‘Aristotelianism’ than that they were cloaking their real aims.

On a closely related point, Leijenhorst wonders why Leibniz is not bolder about his views in his personal notes. One of the major theses of my book is that Leibniz’s rhetorical strategy forbade him to announce many of his underlying assumptions. He intended, I claim, to attract people’s attention in more subtle ways and thereby to nudge them toward the truth. Leijenhorst reasonably argues that the rhetorical strategy chosen for the public presentation of Leibniz’s ideas does not by itself explain a similar reserve in “the private notes and drafts.” But the worry here is relatively easy to address. Since we can be certain that many of Leibniz’s notes are drafts of materials that he intended to publish (although he rarely did), we can comfortably assume that the rhetorical strategy chosen for his public works would extend to the drafts of those works. Nor should it be surprising that the sort of philosophical personality—a personality that used such a controlled rhetorical strategy in public texts and that could rarely bring itself to publish—would maintain its reticence in personal notes. In the latter, we witness a truly profound philo-

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sophical mind thinking out loud, and often playing with ideas. We would have some reason to worry about the lack of explicitness in the early papers if Leibniz's later notes—that is, those written after the composition, say, of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*—were full of clear statements of his fundamental views. They are not. The thesis that explains the textual phenomena best remains the one I offer: Leibniz was simply not inclined to offer up an explicit account of his views in a neat and tidy fashion. I am even inclined to think that former scholars have overstated the importance of texts like the *Discourse on Metaphysics* and the *Monadology*: instead of their canonical status, each of these texts should be seen as just one among several presentations of Leibniz's thought. When we survey the full range of ideas and proposals in the Academy edition, we discover an intellect that is so vast, so grand, and so varied that we are forced to reconsider attaching too much importance to any one of the very different expressions of his ideas. In short, given the nature of Leibniz's intellectual personality, it is not surprising (although it is frustrating!) that all of his writings have the same rhetorical hesitancy.

And it is just this hesitancy that leads Leijenhorst to be disconcerted by the “linearity” of the developmental story presented in the book. To this, I am guilty as charged. The philosophical complexity of the early works is enormous. There is no simple story discernible there. If there were, scholars would have noticed it long ago. But it remains true that it was during this time that Leibniz developed the major doctrines of his metaphysics. By summarizing the stages of that development in each of the ten chapters of the book, I bring to light the origins of Leibniz's metaphysics, but I also thereby suggest a greater coherence to the evolution than actually existed. Although in the end, Leibniz remained committed to a relatively small group of assumptions about substance, property, God, and creation, in the process of working out the details of these assumptions he took lots of small detours.

For example, Leijenhorst is right to point out that Leibniz's discussion of the alchemical doctrine of an eternal “core” (Kern) is an “odd doctrine” that does not fit comfortably within the notion of a corporeal substance as a collection of mind-like substances. But I think that Leijenhorst goes too far when he claims that “it is quite clear from the context that Leibniz is simply experimenting with another view of substance.” There is little about the early works and their context that is “quite clear,” and their obscurity encourages a certain amount of speculation about underlying connections. As I state in the Introduction, one of the things that makes Leibniz's works so difficult is that he “often tries out terminology”

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(p. 11), and as I claim in chapter 1, he often “attempts to engage the sectarian reader by using agreeable philosophical terminology” (p. 57). In *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development*, I sometimes speculate about connections that underlie these terminological differences, but such speculations are offered as “working hypotheses whose confirmation will come when they help to explain both Leibniz’s texts and the evolution of his thought” (p. 97). While it is true that Leibniz ceases to talk about the mind-like soul in a corporeal substance in alchemical terms, the underlying assumption that the soul can be more or less expansive is one that persists and that we find, for example, in the correspondence with Arnauld. Moreover, although the terminology that Leibniz uses in the relevant texts is alchemical, the idea that the power of the soul can emanate to a greater or lesser expanse of body is a position we find in Platonists like Ficino. There are then good reasons to believe that Leibniz’s use of alchemical terminology in his letters to someone interested in alchemy should not be read as just “another view of substance,” but rather as another way of describing one of his underlying assumptions.⁴ Although it would have been a luxury to discuss various alternative readings of some of these genuinely obscure texts, given the vastness of the materials and the radically different possible alternative readings, this seemed impractical (especially since the book is rather long, even in this “linear” form!). However, I admit that my attempt to weave together the various and disparate philosophical threads that Leibniz left hanging all over the early period does suggest that there is less confusion and experimentation than the texts actually contain.

But my primary response both to Cees Leijenhorst’s thoughtful review of my book and to Glenn Hartz’s generous invitation to respond is one of enormous gratitude. An author is extremely fortunate to have a reviewer treat her work with such seriousness, especially a reviewer with the scholarly depth and range of Leijenhorst. And surely it is a wonderful luxury to feel justified in responding to a review with a few small points about methodological disagreements. I am genuinely grateful.

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Notes

¹ See, e.g., Johann C. Sturm, *Philosophia Eclectica*, Altdorf, 1686, pp. 84-86.

² Nor do I think that this is what Dan Garber intended by the use of the term 'naïve' in his article, "Leibniz on Form and Matter," cited by Leijenhorst in n. 6. Indeed, in the section of his paper entitled "Form and Matter in 1669," Garber concludes that for Leibniz "Aristotle is actually the father of the new mechanical philosophy, generally unacknowledged simply because he has been so badly misread for so long" (p. 332). Garber is here following the reading of Leibniz's letter to Thomasius of 1669 which I originally presented in my PhD thesis, defended in 1988, entitled "The Origins and Development of Leibniz's Metaphysics" (and which Garber cites). It is also worth noting that in the thesis, I argue at length for the importance of Eucharistic doctrine to the development of Leibniz's metaphysics. So, Leijenhorst is not quite right to say that my work "confirms" that of Daniel Fouke (see Leijenhorst's note 5). Rather, Fouke's important article on Eucharistic doctrine in the young Leibniz (published in 1991) and my own work developed along parallel tracks.

³ Along these lines, Leijenhorst is not quite right to suggest that because I hold "the Platonists solely responsible for Leibniz's metaphysics of divinity," I thereby miss "possible Platonist influences on his view of sub-stance." In fact, section 2 of Chapter 6, entitled "Mind," discusses the Platonist roots of Leibniz's notion of mind. In that section, I discuss, e.g., how Leibniz took specific Platonist assumptions about mind and applied them "to mind-like substantial forms in non-human substances" (p. 223).

⁴ For further confirmation of Leibniz's continued interest in this doctrine, see an essay of 1676 where he summarizes this position though without the alchemical terminology. See A VI iii 478.