

**Adrian Nita, *La métaphysique du temps chez Leibniz et Kant* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), 288 p.**

**Reviewed by Michael Futch, University of Tulsa**

**I**ts title notwithstanding, this book is a wide-ranging, often diffuse, examination of many aspects of Leibniz's and Kant's philosophies, canvassing not only their views on time, but also on perception and sensation, freedom of the will, and the nature of their respective idealisms. While these topics are sometimes treated in a way that is only tangentially connected to the philosophy of time, the guiding thread that ties them together is a well-known criticism leveled by Kant against Leibniz: the latter is guilty of an amphiboly in virtue of "intellectualizing the appearances." Wrongly taking phenomena to be things in themselves, Leibniz also is supposed to have mistaken our sensations of these phenomena for a confused conceptual understanding of them. On Nita's reconstruction, Kant maintains that Leibniz was led to this erroneous view of knowledge and sensation by way of an equally erroneous view of time, where the latter consists in seeing time as a confused representation and determination of substances (26, 110). Nita tasks himself with rebutting Kant's charge, and does so by way of trying to correct Kant's putative misinterpretation of Leibniz's philosophy of time.

Though this is the general framework of the book, it is not until Chapters 6 and 7 that we encounter the crux of Nita's response to Kant. Given the way in which he has framed Kant's objection ("the most serious accusation is that time is a determination of things in themselves" (27), which is "responsible for all of the Kantian critique" (32)), it would be natural for Nita to argue that monads are not temporal at all. Nita does not opt for this route, but instead ascribes to Leibniz a theory of time according to which there is both an inter-monadic time, which is a time that correlates the states of different monads, and, for each monad, an intra-monadic time, which is a time that orders the states of a single substance. Moreover, the intra-monadic time of each monad "is a condition for the possibility of the succession of [its] states," and "precedes the succession of the states of the monad" (151). In addition to the textual basis for this ascription being thin, it appears to reverse the ontological order of dependency, for Leibniz writes on numerous occasions that time (at least in the sense that Nita is using the term here – more on that below) arises from change, not vice-versa. An equally pressing question in the present context is how, if Nita grants that monads are temporal, he can defuse

Kant's charge. For Nita, the answer lies in denying that the monad is a thing in itself: monads are intrinsically temporal – indeed, he writes that “monads are in time” (135, 137) – but since they are not things in themselves, time is not a condition of things in themselves. After making the puzzling assertion that a monad is a being that, because it is not given in intuition, does not have existence (160), Nita explains that monads cannot be assimilated to things in themselves since they are substances, or objects, whereas a thing in itself is “more a problem than an object” (168). Additionally, monads have a history, and are temporally determined, which is not the case with Kantian noumena (ibid.) Overlooking these dissimilarities between the two, Kant mistakenly assumes that Leibnizian monads are equivalent to his things in themselves, and thus that, for Leibniz, time is a determination of things in themselves. All of this is intended to somehow show that Leibniz did not intellectualize the appearances, but we should ask: Could Kant's criticism really rest on a failure to recognize that there are important differences between how he understands things in themselves, and how Leibniz understood monads? It's hard to think so.

The above is not to say that Nita does not adequately address Kant's criticism, but most of the persuasive work on this score is done in Chapter 5. Here, Nita provides an overview of Leibniz's assorted writings on the distinctions among various kinds of perceptions – obscure, clear, confused, distinct, inadequate, and adequate – contending that, the asseverations of Kant notwithstanding, there is more than merely a difference of degree between sense perception and thought (115). The evidence that Nita adduces, and the interpretations of it that he provides, amount to a fairly convincing case that Leibniz is not guilty of the above amphiboly. The availability of this line of defense, however, and the fact that it more effectively rebuts Kant's allegation than the material in the two subsequent chapters, suggests that the connection between Leibniz's philosophy of time and his putative amphiboly is more tenuous than Nita supposes.

In a book in part dedicated to an analysis of Leibniz's metaphysics of time, one would expect to find a clarifying elucidation about what kind of *ens* time is, and how it differs from and is related to other types of *entia*. Admittedly, this is no easy task since Leibniz's texts are replete with characterizations of time that are not always readily reconcilable with each other. This is partially due to the fact that Leibniz has shifting views on the matter. As is well documented, through the middle period Leibniz sometimes characterizes time as a well-founded phenomenon, whereas in his later writings he usually identifies it with an ideal being of reason,

or an imaginary being. Even within the same period, though, we find Leibniz identifying time as an ideal continuum *and* as a set of relations that supervene on or result from changes. These apparently conflicting characterizations give special urgency to the need for a discriminating investigation of Leibniz's pronouncements on time's ontology, or, at a minimum, the different senses that this term has across Leibniz's corpus. Unfortunately, Nita's book only compounds rather than clarifies this confusion. We are variously told that time is a condition for the possibility of phenomena, a well-founded phenomenon, a relation among phenomena, the principle of succession, a being of the imagination, a divine condition of reality, an intrinsic relation of a monad, and (and most surprisingly) an aggregate of substances or monads, among other things. Nita makes no attempt to explain how these apparently divergent definitions are consistent, let alone coherent, with each other. One immediately wonders how time, as itself a well-founded phenomenon, can be the condition for the possibility of other phenomena, or how, as an aggregate of substances, it can be an intrinsic relation of a monad. Left unexplained, these definitions create more conflicts than Leibniz's own. Even worse, many of them seem to be contradicted by Leibniz's most important explications of time. If time is an aggregate of substances, it is a composite being whose parts are prior to the whole, and yet Leibniz repeatedly insists that time is a "continuum, whose parts are not actual, but can be taken arbitrarily" (G 2.379).

Unsurprisingly, this lack of precision ramifies in other parts of Nita's book. Leibniz famously declares the problem of the composition of continuous magnitudes to be one of the two great labyrinths of human reason, and for many philosophers, unraveling Leibniz's knotty solution to it is every bit as vexatious as the problem itself. On the one hand, Leibniz avers that "changes . . . are not really continuous" and that the transition from one state to another "in no way form[s] a continuous passage," but moves from "one state to the next closest state" (G 2.278, G 7.564). On the other hand, time is a continuous magnitude, and the Law of Continuity requires that "no transition happens by a leap" (G 2.168). If time is continuous, how can change not be so (or, at least, in what sense isn't it so)? Nita barely confronts the problem, simply assuming that since time, as an indeterminate, mathematical being of reason, is continuous, then any temporally related sequence of changes among actual entities must be continuous as well (44, 147-148, 226). This reviewer, at least, is unconvinced, and a number of recent commentators have compellingly argued that what is true of ideal and indeterminate continua cannot also be true of what is actual and determinate. Similarly, Nita writes that Leibniz believes that

time does not exist without things (34), which is certainly true of time considered as a set of relations among phenomena (or, if one prefers, substances), but not true of time considered as a mathematical being of reason. To take one final example, Nita observes that when it comes to substances, the part is prior to the whole, and then immediately adds that in “everything phenomenal, called by Leibniz here ideal . . . the whole is prior to the parts: in the ideal or continuous, ‘the whole is prior to the parts, as an arithmetical unity is prior to the fractions which divide it’” (177; the Leibniz passage quoted by Nita is at G 3.622). This is to misunderstand not only this particular passage, but also a basic distinction in Leibniz’s philosophy. If phenomena are ideal, it is only in the sense that they are aggregates of immaterial monads whose unity is mental. That, however, is very different from being ideal by way of being an indeterminate being of reason that is continuous because it includes both the possible and the actual, considered as possible. In short, the phenomenal realm is neither ideal nor continuous in the way that abstract entities of reason are.

Nita elaborates on Kant’s philosophy of time, including a significant amount of material from the pre-critical period, in a way not indicated in the above review. In Chapter 3, he argues that, like Leibniz, the early Kant holds time to be continuous, infinite, linear, and irreversible, and that the decisive point of divergence is not until the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770 when time becomes a subjective intuition (67). Chapter 4 competently expositis what Kant has to say about time in the critical and post-critical period. Whatever merits his treatment of Kant has, however, are significantly outweighed by the deficiencies of his analyses of Leibniz, only some of which have been noted in the preceding.

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