

**Andreas Blank, *Leibniz: Metaphilosophy and Metaphysics, 1666-1686*. Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2005.**

**Reviewed by Brandon C. Look, University of Kentucky**

In this book, Andreas Blank appeals to Strawson's distinction between revisionary and descriptive metaphysics and argues that, contrary to common opinion, Leibniz (at least in his early years) is engaged in a project of descriptive metaphysics. By 'descriptive metaphysics' Blank understands "a type of metaphysics that makes the implicit assumptions contained in our ordinary world view explicit." But the descriptive strategies attributed to Leibniz are quite varied: "the analysis of everyday concepts, the use of comparative methods, the application of criteria of intelligibility, the application of criteria of reality, the analysis of the structure of thought, the analysis of the structure of action, and the investigation of the role of figures, models, and schemata for the constitution of the calculi." (p. 15) Blank's goal in this book is to illustrate how Leibniz employs these descriptive strategies in his early years.

This book is divided into eight chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of Leibniz's thought from the period 1666-1686. The first chapter concerns Leibniz's reaction to the artificial languages developed by George Dalgarno and John Wilkins. Although Leibniz was openly dismissive of their work, he nevertheless implicitly appealed to some of their fundamental ideas in his universal characteristic. First, Dalgarno and Wilkins attempted to build their artificial languages from a system of simple concepts, and this idea is present in Leibniz's work. But, Blank argues, there is a metaphilosophical dimension as well: Leibniz seems to have adopted their approach to the nature of metaphysical concepts, holding them to be "constituents of everyday concepts that only have to be made explicit." (p. 24) If this is the case, then it is easy to see that one of the tasks of philosophy should be making these conceptual relations explicit, that is, engaging in philosophical and linguistic analysis, an activity that Blank regards as part and parcel of descriptive metaphysics. Moreover, this process of analysis or of making explicit everyday concepts also makes possible a conciliatory approach in philosophy. As Blank shows in the second chapter, this conciliatory approach made possible by philosophical analysis serves to unify the platonic, Christian, and natural law strands of his moral and political philosophy. With the third chapter, Blank moves to more properly metaphysical topics and considers Leibniz's *Hypothesis Physica Nova* and *Theoria Motus Abstracti*. Here it is argued that Leibniz does not think of material objects as collections of immaterial entities (*pace* Mercer), nor does he consider minds to be material entities; rather, according to Blank, Leibniz is engaged in a process of

analyzing our everyday conception of mind and matter with epistemically simple concepts. Of course, one of the features that is supposed to be distinctive to Leibniz's metaphysics in his early and middle years is his commitment to corporeal substances, and, on Blank's view, Leibniz's account of corporeal substance is the result of a conciliatory approach to aristotelianism, atomism, and neo-platonism. But it is also a result of the application of criteria of intelligibility and reality to outer phenomena, another hallmark of descriptive metaphysics. Further, as Blank argues in Chapter Five, there appears to be a tension between Leibniz's typical substance pluralism and the substance monism present in many of his early writings, especially in his last years in Paris. But, ultimately, this tension is created by contrasting conceptions of substance underlying his monism and pluralism; and if we consider these different underlying conceptions, we realize that these views are somehow compatible. (p. 119) To say that Leibniz flirted with monism is not, however, to say that he flirted with spinozistic monism. And Blank considers Leibniz's response to Spinoza in the sixth chapter, arguing that Leibniz's account of mental activity was at all times opposed to that of Spinoza, because reflective acts, for Leibniz, have a diachronic structure and a causal role over and above the mental states that they are about. This account of Leibniz's philosophy of mind and rejection of spinozism allows for an interesting segue to Leibniz's account of striving possibles and the relation of this doctrine to his cognitivist theory of volition. Blank shows first in this chapter that Leibniz's account of possibility has a strong descriptivist component, that it is grounded in our everyday conceptions of what is possible, and that possibility allows of degrees. But he also claims that "the basic insight of Leibniz's theory of volition is that there is no belief that does not involve the propensity to act according to this belief. This insight has the implication that there are no causally indifferent contents in the Divine knowledge of possible substances." (p. 154) Therefore, the striving possibles need not be interpreted in a metaphorical way; they are simply the ideas towards which the Divine mind strives in reflection. The cognitivist theory of volition leads also to Leibniz's account of rational deliberation, the subject of the last chapter of this book. The claim here is that Leibniz conceives of rules as instruments of action, establishing both causal and formal relations between rule and action. But rules play a role not only in the mathematical and logical calculus but also in the understanding of non-mathematical, i.e. metaphysical, concepts. This point allows Blank to appeal to the conclusions of his first chapter, where it was argued that metaphysical concepts are often implicitly contained in our everyday concepts. It is here suggested that the descriptive component of Leibniz's philosophy is also at work, for the relation between sign and signified, concept and object, are made explicit by analysis.

## REVIEW OF BLANK

While the individual chapters of this book tell an interesting story, I remain unmoved by the overarching claim that Leibniz's early metaphysics is best characterized as descriptive rather than revisionary. First, there are several questions that are raised by this interpretation but that are left unanswered. For example, if one were inclined to call Leibniz's metaphysics revisionary, it would certainly be the later monadological metaphysics that would deserve such an appellation. Few, I think, have bothered to understand the metaphysics of Leibniz's early years as either revisionary or descriptive. If we are to take the early metaphysics to be descriptive and the later metaphysics to be revisionary, what accounts the change or difference? Is there a difference in methodology or a difference in content? Could the change of methodology explain the change of content? Second, the meaning of descriptive metaphysics is left quite vague. Indeed, it often seems as if any kind of conceptual analysis would qualify as an instance of doing descriptive metaphysics. But if Strawson's distinction is to be meaningful and meaningfully applied to an historical figure, then there must be more to it than that. Now, Blank has a more complete list of the descriptive strategies that Leibniz employs (mentioned in the first paragraph), but one might naturally wonder what a revisionary metaphysician could be doing that does *not* involve some of these strategies.

Despite my skepticism about the broad interpretative strategy, this book does offer interesting insights into the philosophy of the young Leibniz and is a welcome addition to the literature.

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