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Marine Picon, *Normes et objets du savoir dans les premiers essais leibnitiens*. Préface de Pierre-François Moreau. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021, 348 pp., ISBN 978-2-406-11531-1, 39,00 €.

Picon’s book offers the most thorough commentary ever published on two of Leibniz’s early essays, the *New Method of Learning and Teaching Jurisprudence* (1667; A VI,1, No. 10) and the *Preface to Nizolius* (1670; A VI,2, No. 54). Leibniz’s early essays are read against the background of his many notes and letters from this period, as well as against the background of slightly more than one hundred ancient, medieval and early modern co-texts. The level of scholarship is superb and leads to persuasive criticism of some seemingly firmly established interpretations of Leibniz’s early philosophy.

Chapter 1 argues that Leibniz’s conception of a demonstrative method in jurisprudence is not part of his earliest writings but rather gradually emerged from his responses to Hobbes and the Port-Royal *Logic*. Chapter 2 traces the origin of Leibniz’s view that the “simple” concepts used in legal argumentation should be identified with the realm of “transcendental relations” (understood as those relations that apply to all things) to the influence of late scholastic theories of relations on Protestant metaphysics. Chapter 3 continues the exploration of connections between Leibniz’s treatment of juridical concepts and his treatment of metaphysical concepts by tracing the view that metaphysical concepts should be grounded either on immediate intuition concerning our mental activities or on not further analysable givens of sense perception to views concerning the epistemic foundations of metaphysical concepts in Rudolf Agricola, Rudolf Goclenius, Johann Adam Scherzer and Johannes Clauberg. Chapter 4 argues that Leibniz’s critique of Nizolius’s solution to the problem of universals should be understood from the perspective of Leibniz’s adoption of a humanist account of the signification of general terms grounded in common usage. Finally, Chapter 5 argues that Leibniz’s views concerning the non-arbitrary nature of definitions in jurisprudence, logic and metaphysics derives from his view that the task of giving definitions consists in clarifying the meanings of terms that occur in common language.

Evidently, this line of interpretation questions some widely accepted assumptions about the development of Leibniz’s philosophy. Most interestingly, it questions the assumption that Leibniz, from his earliest years, was committed to a theory of essences that subsist independently of human cognitive acts, whether in the form of abstract entities or in the form of ideas in the divine mind. Picon provides ample textual evidence that shows that a conception of eternal truths that does not invoke independently subsisting essences was developed with great care by thinkers such as Philip Melanchthon, Abraham Calov, Scherzer, and Jacob Thomasius. According to this conception, truths about the essential qualities of things remain true even after these things cease to exist. However, it was argued that this is so because these truths have a conditional character: *If* things of the same kind came into existence again, they would have the same essential qualities as things of this kind had during their actual existence. In this sense, eternal truths about possible things depend on truths about the essential qualities of actual things, not on truths about independently subsisting essences. Picon documents the persistence of this line of thought in the early Leibniz, thereby offering a powerful alternative to interpretations that read Leibniz’s philosophy of the late 1660s and early 1670s as a version of Platonism.

If Picon’s interpretation is on the right track (and I think it is), then it becomes difficult to subsume Leibniz’s early thought under some of the prevailing intellectual trends of his time. As Picon points out, the early Leibniz does not share Bacon’s suspicion of common language, he does not share Hobbes’s conception of the arbitrary nature of definitions, nor does he share Hobbes’s view that the only clear concepts we can understand commit us to a materialistic world-view. But it also becomes difficult to think of Leibniz’s earliest essays as expressing an early version of central ideas in his later philosophy. As Picon emphasizes again and again, projecting later doctrines (such as the doctrine of innate ideas, or the distinction between ideas that are really simple and those that are simple for us, or the conception of possibilities as divine thoughts) into Leibniz’s earliest writings does not work. This, of course, implies that tracing the development of Leibniz’s philosophy may be far more complex than his interpreters have realised so far. Since the period covered by Picon ends with the first months of 1673, much of this developmental story still has to be told.

Due to her all too early passing away, this task will have to be taken up by others. Let me just offer two conjectures concerning how her study may shape the way in which this task could be approached. First, her contextualist approach may sharpen our understanding of the discontinuities with respect to particular philosophical doctrines (such as issues in the metaphysics of modalities or in philosophical theology). Second, in spite of these discontinuities, her focus on the methodological foundations common to jurisprudence and metaphysics may contribute to conveying a sense of some overlooked methodological continuities in Leibniz’s thought. This is so because, even after having adopted an ontology of essences in the divine mind, throughout his Paris years, and arguably beyond, Leibniz continued to consult common usage to find definitions for terms in logic, metaphysics and jurisprudence; he continued to regard everyday intuitions concerning what is just in concrete situations as something that could provide grounds for a more theoretical account of justice; and he continued to invoke the role of intuitive insight into the structure of our mental activities to grasp the signification of central metaphysical terms such as “activity,” “unity,” “change,” “identity” and “substance.” In this sense, some of the early patterns of thought analysed by Picon may have remained relevant for Leibniz even after his ontological views had changed.

Picon’s study thus not only advises us to rethink the two essays on which she has focused, but it also might provide guidance for reconsidering how these essays may have shaped Leibniz’s subsequent methodological reflections. In both senses, those readers who accept the idea that many aspects of Leibniz’s philosophical development still remain to be adequately understood will be rewarded with fascinating food for thought.

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