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Citation for published version:

Cairns, JW Leibniz, Nova methodus discendae docendaeque jurisprudentiae – new translation from Talbot Publishing.

Link:

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Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Leibniz, *Nova methodus discendae docendaeque jurisprudentiae* – new translation from Talbot Publishing

Posted on [15/02/2017](#) by [John Cairns](#)

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is nowadays best remembered as an inventor of calculus (in rivalry with Isaac Newton) and as the man lampooned by Voltaire as Pangloss. But of course, there was much more to him than that. He deserves further study.

Your blogger has visited the charming university buildings at Altdorf near Nuremberg where Leibniz gained his doctorate in law (and where Hugues Doneau had earlier taught); he has also explored some of Leibniz's correspondence with Alexander Cunningham, a Scots scholar, involving kind and energetic assistance from the Leibniz Archive in Hanover. Cunningham spent much of his life working on an unfinished new edition of the Digest; this was a topic of interest to the German polymath – hence their correspondence. But it also indicates the importance of law to Leibniz, an importance often overlooked and perhaps overshadowed by his other achievements as mathematician and philosopher. His very definition of justice as the “charity of the wise” is novel and unique, suggesting the interest in his works on law, and the depths of Leibniz as an original thinker. In 1667, a year after Leibniz gained his doctorate, he published his *Nova methodus discendae docendaeque jurisprudentiae*, which he dedicated to the Elector of Mainz – an ambitious work for a newly fledged jurist. The aim of the book was practical. It also contained an important essay on the law of nature. This discussion is still important. Leibniz reflected on the various and conflicting understandings of natural law in the ancient world, while also engaging in an analysis of modern scholars, most notably Grotius and Hobbes. This is not the place to explore in detail this important work; but it is an interesting exemplar of a rationalist approach, in which, for example, he calls for a logical restructuring of the *Corpus iuris* (which explains his interest in the work of Cunningham) as well as for a revision of legal education.

Of course, the second half of the seventeenth century saw a considerable amount of discussion of the teaching of law, with new subjects introduced into legal education, such as the law of nature and nations, and new methods, such as the *methodus compendiaria*. This means that it is important that we contextualize Leibniz's work as a work on legal education as well as reflecting on it as an exemplar of his legal thought. This means it is necessary to compare it with other contemporary works on the method of legal education, such as Ulric Huber's famous dialogue of 1684, *De ratione juris docendi & discendi diatribe*, recently translated by Margaret Hewett (Nijmegen 2010). After all, the theme is hardly original; what is original is the treatment.

In 2014, Professor Matthias Armgardt of Konstanz, the noted expert on Leibniz's legal philosophy, remarked that for proper study of Leibniz's legal thought, translations were necessary of a number of the great German scholar's works, including a translation of the *Nova methodus*; Armgardt noted, however, that this work had very recently been translated into Italian by Carmelo Massimo de Iuliis. The same translator has now produced an English version of the 1667 Frankfurt edition of the *Nova methodus* with notes and an introduction. For all interested in thinking about legal education and legal study in the Baroque age, this will be an invaluable publication, making more accessible the thoughts—if youthful—of an intellectual giant of the age. The volume contains a useful introduction to Leibniz, as well as annotations. The distinguished comparatist, William E. Butler of Pennsylvania State, best known for his work on the Soviet Union and Russia, has provided a preface. While the *Nova methodus* is readily available in Latin in libraries or on the internet, the new translation will hopefully encourage greater engagement with Leibniz's legal work in the Anglophone world. The days where proper study can be expected of works in Latin is passing. This translation should make it easier both to place

the Nova methodus contextually in a consideration of legal education in Europe and to assess its impact. The new translation has been published by Talbot Publishing, an imprint of the Lawbook Exchange, at what is now a very modest cost for a hardback book: \$85.00 (ISBN 978-1-61619-547-2). This must encourage further study of this important figure in the world of English-language scholarship.

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