

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, Vierte Reihe (Politische Schriften)*, Band 4, ed. Hartmut Rudolph et al. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001).

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The latest volume of *Political Writings* in the great Berlin-Brandenburg Academy Edition of Leibniz' *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (cited hereafter as *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4) reveals once again the astonishing range of Leibniz' contributions to the political-moral-legal sphere: more than 900 pages document Leibniz' reflections on augmenting public well-being through new academies of science, on the policies of the Imperial court in Vienna, on the improvement of Imperial finances and military readiness (especially to counter Louis XIV), on the political history of Sachsen-Lauenburg, on the interests of Hannover-Brunswick, on European politics, on "church politics" and ecumenism, on the overcoming of "schism" through wise charity, on coinage and commemorative medallions, even on pensions and life-insurance. (This will be surprising only to those who forget that Leibniz' doctoral degree and earliest publications were in the field of jurisprudence). What holds this far-flung, wide-ranging collection together, however, achieving Leibnizian "unity in multiplicity"—as the learned editor of Vol. 4, Dr. Hartmut Rudolph, makes clear in his illuminating Introduction—is Leibniz' devotion to "the common good;" for Rudolph is entirely right to say that Leibniz reveals his affection for the *bonum commune*, "the general best," in a characteristic letter to Emperor Leopold I from 1688: "My entire purpose now," Leibniz says, "is to forward the general good [*das gemeine Beste*] through the few talents which God has given me."¹ And this concern for *le bien général* is crowned, in the present Volume 4, by Leibniz' magisterial *Memoir for Enlightened Persons of Good Intention*—of which we finally have a wholly reliable text, thanks to Dr. Rudolph and his colleagues at the Leibniz Arbeitsstelle in Potsdam.

But how exactly does Leibniz understand the *bonum commune*, the "common good?" Here it will be useful to indicate what Leibniz means by this contested notion—fitting some of the best pieces from *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4 into this more general context, so that the unity of Leibniz' practical thought will be evident.

I. The "Common Good"

Whether one is discussing Leibniz or any other moral-political philosopher, the idea of "the common good" (obviously) has two elements: the notion of *commonality*, and the notion of *goodness*. On the question of commonality, it is best to

construct (or rather recognize) a *continuum* in which the smallest or most restricted commonality will be that of any two persons with some shared *rapport*, and in which the greatest or most extensive commonality will be that of all rational beings, finite or infinite (in what Leibniz called “The State of the Universe” or The City of God).² One can imagine a very small commonality, such as that of the so-called “Society for the Common Good” in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*³—which really turns out to be a music-appreciation society frequented by a half-dozen persons(!); or one can imagine a “universal” commonality governed by timeless and placeless eternal moral verities which restrict even the gods themselves (Plato/Leibniz). We shall come back to the idea of the common, stressing Leibniz’ resolute universalism, in a moment, pointing out at the same time that a writer such as Rousseau finds himself in the middle of the “commonality” *continuum*—since Rousseau wants to avoid arbitrary, willful, self-loving *volonté particulière*, on one side, but stops at the notion of a *volonté générale* which one has “as a citizen,” without going on (so to speak) to a *volonté universelle* for the common good of the whole *genre humain*, a *morale universelle*⁴ (à la Kant). Rousseau, after all, is most often concerned with (e.g.) the “Spartan mother” at the beginning of *Émile*, who asks *not* whether her own sons have survived a battle but whether the common good of the *polis* still lives: and when she learns that Sparta is victorious though her own family is annihilated, she gives thanks to the gods—whereupon Rousseau says, *voilà une citoyenne!*⁵ If Thomas Mann’s “Society for the Common Good” is limited to a handful of persons, and Rousseau’s notion of *le bien général* (usually) stops at the borders of Sparta, Rome or Geneva, Leibniz by contrast has (as we shall see) the most universalistic idea of “the common good” or of *le bien universel* of any major philosopher between Plato and Kant. (It is one of the many merits of *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4 to make this clear.)

As for “good,” the second half of “common good”: the idea of the good is the most general evaluative notion we possess; but it will be conceived radically differently by Plato (for whom the “good” of a ship or a shoe in the *Gorgias* is its *telos* or function⁶), by Augustine and Kant (for whom the “good will” is the only “unqualified” good⁷), or by Bentham (for whom the good is equivalent to “maximized” satisfaction or happiness⁸). In Leibniz, most of the time, “the good” is equal to *perfection*—as in the magisterial “Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice” of c. 1703: “One may ask what the true good is. I answer that it is nothing else than that which serves in the perfection of intelligent substances: from which it is clear that order, contentment, joy, wisdom, goodness and virtue are good things essentially, and can never be evil.”⁹ And in the present volume of

Politische Schriften, this perfectionism is made even more politically pointed in section 9 of the *Memoir for Enlightened Persons of Good Intention*: “I put forward this great principle of metaphysics as well as of morality, that the world is governed by the most perfect intelligence that is possible—which means that one must consider it as a universal monarchy, whose head is omnipotent and sovereignly wise, and whose subjects are all minds, that is to say all substances capable of intelligence or of society with God; and that all the rest [of the world] is only the instrument of the glory of God and of the felicity of minds... From this follows another principle which is purely practical: which is that the more intelligent beings have a good will and are brought to contribute to the glory of God or (what is the same thing) to common happiness, the more they will themselves take part in this happiness.”¹⁰

II. Leibniz’ Universalism

Leibniz was the greatest moral universalist between Plato and Kant; he insisted that “provided something of importance is achieved, I am indifferent whether it is done in Germany or in France, for I seek the good of mankind. I am neither a phil-Hellene nor a philo-Roman, but a philanthropos.”¹¹ He was, moreover, a moral universalist in a very strict and literal sense: “justice is ... that which is useful to the community, and *the common good* is the supreme law—a community, however, let it be recalled, not of a few, not of a particular nation, but of all those who are part of the City of God and, so to speak, of the state of the universe.”¹² In his aptly-named *jurisprudence universelle*, after all, Leibniz urges that “as for the order of justice, I believe that there are universal rules which must be valid as much with respect to God as with respect to [finite] intelligent creatures ... [so that] natural jurisprudence and every other truth is the same in heaven and on earth.”¹³ Thus it is no accident that Leibniz’ most important writing about justice, the “*Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice*,” begins with a verbatim paraphrase of Plato’s *Euthyphro* – for the central doctrine of *Euthyphro* is that there are reason-ordained, changeless, universally valid “eternal moral verities” which constrain the gods as much as they limit men, creating a universal “common good.”¹⁴ In any case “the City of God,” and the *bien général* (or rather the *bien universel*) of that cosmopolis, was Leibniz’ ultimate standard, and shaped everything he said about *iurisprudentia universalis*.

Leibniz’ tendency to move toward moral universalism and Platonic rationalism when considering *the common good* is clear (to take an example) in his charitable irenic efforts to overcome the “schism” within Western Christianity. In the “Unvorgreifliches Bedencken,” which he wrote in 1698-1704 in an effort to con-

ciliate the Evangelical and the Reformed churches, he appeals not to a narrow, local common ground or common good shared only by Lutherans and Calvinists, but to what all rational beings, universally, can find good and just. Characteristically, he once again paraphrases Plato's *Euthyphro* in his schism-healing effort—what is universally valid even for the gods must be valid for men. Leibniz' constant tendency, indeed, is to move toward the high ground of a “morally necessary” *universal* justice.¹⁵ (The “Unvorgreifliches Bedencken,” published only fragmentarily by Grua in *Textes inédits*, will occupy a large space in *Politische Schriften* Vol. 6—when that volume appears in a few years' time).

III. Leibniz' Theory of Justice and of the Common Good

The central idea of Leibniz' “universal jurisprudence,” which aims to find quasi-geometrical eternal moral verities equally valid for all rational beings, human or divine, is that justice is “the charity of the wise (*caritas sapientis*)” or “universal benevolence”—that it is not mere conformity to sovereign-ordained “positive” law given *ex plenitudo potestatis* (in the manner of Hobbes), nor mere “refraining from harm” or even “rendering what is due” (the *neminem laedere* and *suum cuique tribuere* of Roman law).¹⁶ (This idea, first adumbrated in the *Codex Iuris Gentium* [1693], will soon dominate *Politische Schriften* Vol. 5—in which the *Codex* will be the single weightiest writing.) Now the equal stress on “charity” and on “wisdom” suggests that Leibniz' practical thought is a kind of fusing of Platonism—in which the “wise” know the eternal truths such as “absolute” goodness (*Phaedo* 75d) which the gods themselves also know and love (*Euthyphro* 9e-10e) and therefore deserve to rule (*Republic* 443 d-e)—and of Pauline Christianity, whose key moral idea is that charity or love is the first of the virtues (“though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal”).¹⁷ There is, historically, nothing remarkable in trying to fuse Platonism and Christianity: for Augustine's thought (particularly the early *De Doctrina Christiana*) is just such a fusion.¹⁸ But Leibniz was the last of the great Christian Platonists, and left the world just as Hume, Rousseau and Kant were about to transform and “secularize” it: Hume by converting morality into psychology (“sentiments” of approval and disapproval disjointed from “reason”), Rousseau by reverting to pre-Christian antiquity (the “Spartan mother” with a radically civic “general will”), and Kant by rethinking Aristotelian *telos* (in order to respect persons as “ends” who ought never to be treated merely as “means,” and in order to define morality as “pure practical teleology”).¹⁹

Leibniz' boldest and most striking equation of “the idea of the common good” with Christian-Platonic “wise charity” is to be found in his remarkable *Elementa*

Iuris Perpetui (1695), which also will soon appear in *Politische Schriften* Vol. 5, and which begins by insisting that natural justice is not simply the “first” of the virtues, à la Aristotle or Aquinas, but that such justice “contains” all of the moral virtues, and that it relates to “the common good” or “the perfection of the universe” or “the glory of God”—where these three distinct things are morally equivalent in Leibniz’ usual sense (the sense that in working with wise charity for the common good of humanity one is following the “presumptive will” of God as just monarch of the best of all possible worlds).²⁰

But the really bold and striking thing in this 1695 writing is that Leibniz goes on to say that “the precepts of the eternal law, which are called ‘natural,’ are nothing other than the laws of the perfect state ... The principles in question are three: *neminem laedere, suum cuique tribuere, pie vivere*. The first [to injure no one] is the precept of peace, the second [to render each his due] is that of commodious living, the third [to live piously or charitably] is that of salvation.” In this remarkable paragraph, the “eternal,” the “natural,” and the Roman are made equivalent (as “perfect laws”), and that jurisprudential Trinity then governs not just the “human forum” but the perfect state of the best *kosmos*, “the common good” of the universe—at least once one transforms *honeste vivere* into *pie vivere*. No longer are Roman legal maxims just historical residues of a concrete legal and jurisprudential system; they have become the principles of “natural” (indeed of “eternal”) justice. But this is not surprising in Leibniz, who could rank himself among those for whom “the Roman laws are not considered as laws, but simply as written reason [*la raison écrite*].” And when Leibniz goes on to say, slightly later, that since “the love of God” or of the *summum bonum* “prevails over every other desire,” the “supreme and most perfect criterion of natural justice consists in this third precept of true piety,” and that “human society itself must be ordered in such a way that it conforms as much as possible to the divine” (to that “*universal* society which can be called the City of God”), he has finally equated the eternal, the “natural,” the Roman, “written reason,” and the divine. And since universal justice is *caritas sapientis*, he has equated the eternal, the natural, the Roman, the reasonable, the divine, and the charitable.²¹ (Even for so very synthetic a mind as Leibniz’, this is an amazing synthesis!)

If in the Preface to the *Theodicy* one had learned that the duty of wise charity is given by “supreme reason,”²² not just by St. Paul, in the *Elementa Iuris Perpetui* charity is the heart of living piously, and that pious living is a “sublimated” form of Roman-law *honeste vivere*. In the end, then, Leibniz the “natural lawyer” wants to say something like this: “Roman” justice = Christian *caritas sapientis* = the

common (universal) good = reason = nature = eternity = divinity. For “after the writings of the geometers there is nothing that one can compare, for force and solidity, to the writings of the Roman juriconsults ... never has natural law been so frequently interrogated, so faithfully understood, so punctually followed, as in the works of these great men” (to Kestner, 1716, Dutens IV, 3, 267). For Leibniz in the *Elementa Iuris Perpetui*, the “common good,” *iurisprudentia universalis*, and “the glory of God” are *morally* equivalent. But this had been Leibniz’ view as far back as the *Grundriss* of 1671:

“It follows incontestably that *caritas, amor Dei super omnia*, and true contrition, on which the assurance of beatitude depends, is nothing other than *amare bonum publicum et harmoniam universalem* [to love the public good and the universal harmony]... for between universal harmony and the glory of God, there is the same difference as between body and shadow, person and image, *radio directo et reflexo* [a direct or reflected beam], inasmuch as one is a matter of fact, while the other is in the soul of those who know it.”²³

Roughly this same line of thought is taken up most effectively and eloquently, in the present *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, by Leibniz’ *De Religionis Pace* (c. 1691)—which urges that without a social unity whose precept is “the highest charity,” there will be “enormous evils”: “hatred and mistrust, internecine war, triumphant infidelity, impiety, frightful sects in England and Holland, libertinism, all religion held in contempt.” And the antidote to these socially divisive evils is “the perfection of charity,” which is the same as “the perfection of the will”—not surprisingly, if *caritas sapientis* and *benevolentia universalis* are (as Leibniz insists) equivalent and interchangeable. (In the margin of *De Religionis Pace* Leibniz appeals to Erasmus’ *De sarcienda ecclesiae Concordia* [1533]—which had striven precisely to ground social “concord” in true charity. And in *Annotata Quaedam ad Concilium Tridentinum*, written about a year earlier, he says that “charity or the love of God *super omnia*” is the heart of “the habit of justice”; here he recalls the work of his favorite modern Catholic writer, the Jesuit Father Friedrich Spee—whose insistence on *caritas* as the first of the virtues had brought about the end of witchcraft trials in Mainz a few decades before Leibniz’ service there.)²⁴

IV. Political-Moral Consequences

For Leibniz it is essential that the wise and virtuous who (ought to) rule devote all their efforts to the common good, not merely to prevent misery but to promote actual improvement in both the material living conditions and the knowledge and virtue of the citizens. “The end of politics, after virtue,” Leibniz wrote, “is the maintenance of abundance, so that men will be in a better position to work in

common concert for those solid objects of knowledge which cause the sovereign Author to be admired and loved.”²⁵ Leibniz’ most eloquent statement in this vein—and one which brings out not his Platonizing but his modernist side—is imbedded in one of his letters (1699) to Thomas Burnett.

You know, Sir, my principles, which are to prefer *the common good*, to all other considerations, even to glory and money; I doubt not at all that a person of Mr. Newton’s strength shares my feeling. The more staunch one is, the more one has this disposition, which is the great principle of an honorable man, and even of justice and true piety; for to contribute to the public good and to the glory of God is the same thing. It seems that the goal of the whole human race should be principally the knowledge and the development of the marvels of God, and that it is for this that God has given it the empire of this globe. And, Mr. Newton being one of those men of the world who can contribute most to this, it would be almost criminal of him to let himself be diverted by impediments which are not absolutely insurmountable.²⁶

“The greater his talent, the greater his obligation,” Leibniz goes on to say. “For in my opinion an Archimedes, a Galileo, a Kepler, a Descartes, a Huygens, a Newton are more important with respect to the great goal of the human race than great military men,” and they are “at least on a par with those esteemed legislators whose aim has been to lead men to what is truly good and solid.”²⁷

If Leibniz’ insistence on liberty links him to the great English liberals of his century, his emphasis on charity and welfare separated him from them; he did not stress, as did they, rights, representation, or a Benthamite “dislocability” of rulers, but he was much more interested in welfare and in the general improvement of men than any English liberal. That much is apparent in a strong passage from his already-mentioned *Memoir for Enlightened Persons of Good Intention* – which is philosophically the most weighty piece in *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4:

The greatest and most efficacious means ... of augmenting the general welfare of men, while enlightening them, while turning them toward the good and while freeing them from annoying inconveniences [poverty, unemployment, maleducation] insofar as this is feasible, would be to persuade great princes and their principal ministers to make extraordinary efforts to procure such great goods and to allow our times to enjoy advantages which, without this [extraordinary effort] would be reserved for a distant posterity...And those who are in a position to make considerable outlays should not limit themselves to matters of pleasure, or of honor and interest, but should devote a part to that which can procure solid advantages for the public good. For this is a

charity which is worth as much as, and often more than, the alms which are for a small number of individuals.²⁸

Leibniz, in his *Memoir*, assures the princes who are to make these wisely charitable efforts that they will be working not simply for “immortal glory” and for “their own perfection and satisfaction,” but also in their own (enlightened) interest: not only will they have subjects who are “more virtuous and better-suited to serve them well,” but—and here Leibniz gives more than a hint of his opinion of the general run of German aristocrats—“persons of leisure and means, instead of amusing themselves with trifles, with criminal or ruinous pleasures, and with intrigues,” will find their satisfaction in becoming virtuous.²⁹ While English liberalism concentrated mostly on the state as a quasi-judicial authority defending natural rights (including property rights)—here it is no accident that Locke speaks of government as a “judge” rather than a sovereign³⁰—Leibniz by contrast concerned himself with social well-being and the common good; in dozens of projects which he pressed on numerous princes—including the Emperor in Vienna, as *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4 makes clear—he advocated the setting up of economic councils which would oversee not only manufacturing and agriculture, but also public health and education (“*optima respublica intelligi non potest sine optima educatione* [the best commonwealth is not possible without the best education]”),³¹ and insisted again and again that “it is much better to prevent poverty and misery, which is the mother of crimes, than to relieve it after it is born.”³² His strenuous charitable efforts to found academies of arts and sciences in a number of major capitals were successful only in Berlin; but his endeavors to interest Peter the Great of Russia, the Elector of Saxony in Dresden, and the Holy Roman Emperor in such academies shows how truly interested he was in making benevolence an important *public* virtue.

These public-spirited efforts had their beginning in the late 1680s with the Emperor in Vienna, as *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4 reveals. In a set of overlapping memoranda from 1688-89, Leibniz reminds the Imperial court of his contributions to the European *bonum commune*: he mentions above all the *Nova Methodus* (with its effort to reform and rationalize inherited Roman law and jurisprudence) the *Consilium Aegyptiacum* (with its attempt to divert Louis XIV’s bellicosity from Europe to Egypt), and even the *Mars Christianissimus* of 1683 (with its ferociously funny send-up of Louis XIV as “vicar” of Christ). Following wide-ranging remarks about the sciences and the arts, education, welfare, trade, commerce, and military preparedness, Leibniz ends with one of his eloquent *encomia* of the sciences:

Science is the true *thesaurus* of the human race, so that one can distinguish between barbarian and civilized peoples: Therein lies our strength and preservation... I have, since my earliest youth, turned my mind to the general perfection of the human sciences, and to the common good... After care for souls and the spread of true Christendom comes human welfare [*Menschliche Wohlfahrt*] through the sciences, and in their use for the general happiness.³³

Leibniz' eloquent memoranda from the late 1680s are the spiritual ancestors of those later papers in which he offers himself as understander and defender of *le bien général* – for example in his 1712 letter to Count Golofkin (minister to Peter the Great), in which Leibniz says that ‘I think that his Czarist Majesty could make, very soon, some great advances’ toward the end of “making letters, sciences, and arts flourish in his great empire” without “incurring great expenses.” “With a few well-chosen persons, plenty of good correspondence, and several good orders,” Leibniz goes on, “one will go farther in a little time (and with little expense) than one would otherwise be able to do with much time and much cost.”³⁴

Leibniz then indulges in some self-praise, but only to show what he could contribute to the general good:

And because, since my youth, my great end has been to work for the glory of God through the increase of the sciences, which best mark the divine power, wisdom, and goodness (in which I have partly succeeded by divine grace, having made important new discoveries which are well-known in the Republic of Letters), and since I have preferred this end to honors and to fortune—though my research has obliged me to enter into responsibilities where I have had justice, history, and political affairs as my object—I have always been ready to turn my thoughts toward this great end, and I have only sought a great prince who has the same purpose.³⁵

In this 1712 letter Leibniz goes on to say that he hopes to have found such a prince “in the person of the great Czar,” and promises that Peter “will never find a person who is more zealous for this important plan and who is less concerned with his particular interest.”

Provided that I find the means and the occasions to contribute efficaciously to *the common good* in these matters ... I distinguish neither nation nor party, and I should sooner see the sciences made flourishing among the Russians than to see them cultivated in a mediocre way in Germany. The country in which this shall go best will be the one which is dearest to me, since the whole human race will always profit from it, and its true treasures will be thereby augmented. For the true treasures of the human race are the arts and the

sciences. This is what most distinguishes men from beasts and civilized peoples from barbarians.³⁶

Leibniz thought that many rulers made the mistake of imagining that they could be glorious through their “destructions and desolations,” and that it was his function to demonstrate the superiority of constructive to destructive actions. As he noted in one of his useful poems,

*Quel triomphe qu’ on puisse obtenir par la guerre,
Obliger est bien plus que conquerir la terre.*³⁷

For Leibniz, in short, nothing matters more than realizing “the common good” through *caritas sapientis* and *benevolentia universalis*—for this is morally identical to “the glory of God.” But this had been Leibniz’ view since the 1670s: “We must give testimony of the supreme love which we bear towards God, through the charity which we owe to our neighbor. And we must make all imaginable efforts to contribute something to the public good. For it is God who is the Lord, and to him belongs the public good as his own; and everything we do for the least of his subjects (whom he has the goodness to treat as brothers) will be done for him [A VI, 4, teil “C,” p. 2238].”

V. Late Reflections

Late in life, Leibniz drew together his reflections on justice as wise charity (linking up justice, *caritas*, *sapientia*, the common good, and “feelings of perfection”) in two crucial texts: the first, “Felicity,” from c. 1694–1698 (which will appear in *Politische Schriften* Vol. 5), is more secular and psychological; the second, “True Piety,” from c. 1710, is more conventionally Christian. But both serve to fix his final moral-political ideas about “goodness” and “commonality.”

Leibniz’ most effective late effort to link up his metaphysics, psychology, and charitable ethics through the idea of “perfection” is contained in his notes on “Felicity,” in which he says that

1. Virtue is the habit of acting according to wisdom. It is necessary that practice accompany knowledge.
2. Wisdom is the science of felicity, [and] is what must be studied above all other things.
3. Felicity is a lasting state of pleasure. Thus it is good to abandon or moderate pleasures which can be injurious, by causing misfortunes or by blocking better and more lasting pleasures.
4. Pleasure is a knowledge or feeling of perfection, not only in ourselves, but also in others, for in this way some further perfection is aroused in us.
5. To love is to find pleasure in the perfection of another.

6. Justice is charity or a habit of loving conformed to wisdom. Thus when one is inclined to justice, one tries to procure good for everybody, so far as one can, reasonably, but in proportion to the needs and merits of each: and even if one is obliged sometimes to punish evil persons, it is for *the common good*.³⁸

Love of others must be an extension of one's worthiest pleasure: an expansion of oneself, a generous taking in of others, not a Fénelonian negation of self, is required. Men must scale the continuum of pleasures; near the top, just beneath the love of God, they will find love of neighbor and concern for the common good, on which justice turns. Leibniz most eloquent summary of this view, in his letter concerning "True Piety" (1710), urged that "practice is the touchstone of faith. And it is not only what many people practice themselves, but what they make God practice, which betrays them."

They depict him as limited in his views, deranging and refashioning his own work at every moment, attached to trifles, formalistic, capricious, without pity with respect to some, and without justice toward others, gratifying himself groundlessly, punishing without measure, indifferent to virtue, showing his greatness through evil, impotent with respect to the good and willing it only half-heartedly, using an arbitrary power, and using it inappropriately; finally weak, unreasonable, malignant, and in a word such as they would show themselves when they have the power or when they think about having it: for they imitate only too much the idol which they adore.³⁹

Idola tribus take the place of the *imitatio Dei*: perfectly unjust people fantasize a perfectly unjust God. By contrast with those people who "talk enough about the goodness of God while they destroy the idea of it," true piety shows us that "one cannot love God who is invisible when one does not love his neighbor who is visible."

Those who ... reduce justice to [mere] rigor, and who fail altogether to understand that one cannot be just without being benevolent ... in a word, not only those who look for their profit, pleasure, and glory in the misery of others, but also those who are not at all anxious to procure *the common good* and to lift out of misery those who are in their care, and generally those who show themselves to be without enlightenment and without charity, boast in vain of a piety which they do not know at all, whatever appearance they create.⁴⁰

The sincerity of that heartfelt passage concerning "the common good" is impossible to mistake: it echoes Leibniz' defense of God's justice in the *Theodicy*, and reasserts the fundamental Leibnizian conviction that "universal right is the same

for God and for men.” And the notion of “lifting out of misery” recalls Leibniz’ ascent from (negative) *neminem laedere* to (positive) *caritas sapientis* by a flowing continuum of infinitely small degrees. “True Piety” represents the whole of Leibnizian ethics as surely as each monad expresses the whole of the “best” world. And it also shows, not at all incidentally, that the great Leibniz scholar Jean Baruzi was correct to insist that Leibniz’ notion of charity owed most to the thought of St. John: “The connection which Leibniz makes between Johannine thought and his own doctrine of *the common good* ... is permanent in his mind ... the one whom he calls ‘the most sublime of the evangelists’ in the *Theodicy* was always considered by him to be such.”⁴¹ For St. John had given an absolute primacy to *caritas* which is not so consistently present in St. Paul or Augustine—or, indeed, in anyone before Leibniz himself re-defined “the common good” *through* charity, wisdom and perfection.

VI. Darker Thoughts

None of this means that Leibniz was sanguine about the ease of establishing a universal “common good,” a “state of the universe” completely governed by wise charity and benevolence; had he not been well-aware, indeed, of the depressing gulf between what ought to be and what commonly happens, his services as a shrewd and insightful counsellor would not have been so widely sought-after. And so occasionally, in *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, one finds Leibniz in a darkly reflective mood in which the Augustinian “miseries” of the human condition seem to militate against the ready achievement of a *bonum commune*—especially in the grim *Consultation sur les affaires générales* of 1691:

... We can count better on that which is in our power, or at least in that of our friends, than on what we can claim to get from our enemies, or from those who are indifferent. But men are so attached to their ways, or to their profit (however small it may be), or to vain-glory, that one has almost as much trouble with friends as with enemies. Indeed there are people who are not upset if their companions are beaten, even if the counter-strike rebounds on themselves—because this companion casts a shadow on their ambition or their convenience, or because his judgement has been followed. One is more sensitive with respect to friends than with respect to declared enemies (since one believes that it is more natural and less shameful to suffer them), and these vexations ordinarily give comfort to the common enemy. This is a misery inseparable from the human condition, and the wisest have trouble in resisting

it.⁴²

In this same dark vein, Leibniz goes on in the *Consultation* to say that one can hope to achieve a Pan-European “common good” (against French imperialism) only by adroitly manipulating the tenebrous under-side of human psychology – at least when moral appeals fail to be effective:

Among the Swiss [for example] it is useless to use the most solid reasons about the public good. The best families of the country are intertwined with France because of the military employments which she gives them; these are the silver-mines of the Swiss... In order to detach the Swiss from their neutrality I see only one way, but one which seems to me not very sure. This would be to excite rebellions against the [Swiss] magistrates, through demagogues or emissaries capable of stirring up the populace... For the magistrates (that is to say the best families) profit too much from serving France to give this up gladly. And since the populace naturally hates the rich and is easily suspicious of them, this scheme might apparently work. The seeds of sedition in Basel had already germinated in other places. Since, however, means of this sort do not often succeed, one must not count them.⁴³

These are harsh reflections that one would sooner expect to find in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*, or in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, or in Hobbes’ account of the state of nature, than in Leibniz’ version of Christian-Platonic universalism. But one of the striking things about Leibniz the social theorist is that he can, like Kant, look steadily and unflinchingly at garden-variety evils and still cling to a charity-governed “state of the universe”—just as Kant never abandoned the Kingdom of Ends merely because he feared that “of such crooked wood as man is made of nothing perfectly straight can ever be fashioned.” For Leibniz, as for Kant, possible good must not be given up in the face of probable evil.

VII. Conclusion

Given the high quality of *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4—the best pieces themselves, and the skill with which they are edited and presented—one can now look forward to volumes 5 and 6 in the next few years: for Vol. 5 will be (rightly) dominated by the great 1693 Preface to the *Codex Iuris Gentium* (with Leibniz’ first full insistence that *iustitia est caritas sapientis seu benevolentia universalis*); and Vol. 6 will be shaped by *Novissima Sinica* (1697) and by the “Unvorgreifliches Bedencken” (1698). Splendid things are in prospect, and they are in the capable hands of Dr. Hartmut Rudolph—to whom all Leibniz-scholars owe a deep debt of gratitude. For the finest writings in *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4 are nothing less than – in Dr. Rudolph’s words – “a wide-ranging appeal for the engagement of

individuals in the service of the general good, with the goal of the ‘perfection of men’.”⁴

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Notes

¹G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, Vierte Reihe (Politische Schriften)*, Band. 4, ed. Hartmut Rudolph (Berlin: Akademie Verlag), 2001, p. xxi.

²Leibniz, *Institutionem Iuris Perpetui*, Mollat p. 1.

³Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter), New York 1948, ch. 3.

⁴Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social*, II, 6-7; *Économie politique, passim*.

⁵Rousseau, *Émile* (Pléiade ed.), pp. 5-6.

⁶Plato, *Gorgias, Passim*.

⁷Augustine, *De Libero Arbitrio* I, 12.

⁸Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Ch. 1.

⁹Leibniz, “Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice,” op. cit., Mollat p. 34.

¹⁰Leibniz, *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, op. cit., p. 614.

¹¹Leibniz, letter to des Billettes, Loemker II, p. 775.

¹²Same as note 1 (*Supra*).

¹³Leibniz, letter to Landgraf Ernst, in Grua, *Textes inédits*, vol 1, pp. 238-239.

¹⁴Plato, *Euthyphro* 9e-10e

¹⁵Leibniz, “Unvorgreifliches Bedencken,” in Grua, op. cit., Vol. 2, pp. 510 ff.

¹⁶Leibniz, *Codex Iuris Gentium* (Praefatio), xi-xiii, in Dutens Vol. 4, 3, pp. 270 ff.

¹⁷St. Paul, 1 *Corinthians* xiii.

¹⁸St. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I, 27 (28a).

¹⁹Kant, “Über den Gebrauch Teleologischer Prinzipien,” in *Werke*, ed. Cassirer (Berlin 1922), Vol. 4, pp. 489 ff.

²⁰Leibniz, *Elementa Iuris Perpetui*, in *Scritti politici*, ed. V. Mathieu (Torino 1965), pp. 192 ff.

²¹Ibid.

²²Leibniz, *Theodicée* (1710), “Preliminary Discourse.”

²³Leibniz, *Grundriss*, AA IV, 1, pp. 530 ff.

²⁴Leibniz, *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, op. cit., pp. 544-47.

²⁵Ger. III, p. 261.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

- ²⁸ Leibniz, *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, op. cit., pp. 617 ff.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, (*Politische Schriften* Vol. 4), pp. 617 ff.
- ³⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 2nd Treatise, secs. 6 ff, esp. sec. 13.
- ³¹ Leibniz, *De Tribus Iuris Naturae*, Mollat p. 18.
- ³² Leibniz, *Werke*, ed. Klopp, Vol X, p. 14.
- ³³ Leibniz, *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, op. cit., pp. 15, 21, 43.
- ³⁴ Leibniz, letter to Golofkin, F de C VII, pp. 502 ff.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Leibniz, poem for Mlle. De Scudéry, Klopp VI, p. 177.
- ³⁸ Leibniz, *Félicité*, in Grua, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 579 ff.
- ³⁹ Leibniz, “La véritable piété,” in Grua, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 499-500.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Jean Baruzi, “Du Discours de Metaphysique à la Theodicée,” *Révue philosophique* 10, no. 12 (1946), pp. 390-409.
- ⁴² Leibniz, *Politische Schriften* Vol. 4, op. cit., pp. 471-72.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xlvi (“Einleitung”).