

BOOK REVIEWS

G.W. Leibniz, *Allgemeiner Politischer und Historischer Briefwechsel*, Fünfzehnter Band. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998.

Reviewed by Patrick Riley, Harvard University
(*In Memoriam Gerda Utermöhlen*)

The publication of the fifteenth volume of Leibniz' "General Political and Historical Correspondence," covering the period January to September 1698 (and cited hereafter as "Correspondence Vol. 15"), does not revolutionize our view of Leibniz' practical philosophy. But it does throw valuable light on his moral, political, jurisprudential and religious thought in general, and on two extremely important works in particular: the *Novissima Sinica* ("Latest News from China"), which Leibniz had published in 1697 and was about to revise and re-publish in 1699¹, and the *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken* ("Disinterested Thoughts"), which he began in 1698 with his friend the Lutheran Abbot Gerhard Molanus as part of his irenical project of healing the "schism" between Evangelicals ("Lutherans") and the Reformed ("Calvinists").² For Leibniz' moral-political thought it is the letters concerning these two works—and there are many of them in "Correspondence Vol. 15"—which matter most, even if other letters, to be mentioned briefly at the end of this review, throw further light on additional Leibnizian practical concerns.

What links *Novissima Sinica* and "Disinterested Thoughts" is nothing less than Leibniz' celebrated "universal jurisprudence" itself—a justice which, if truly *universelle*, should succeed in bridging the world-spanning gap between China and Northern Germany. The wise course, then, will be to say a few preliminary words about Leibnizian *jurisprudentia universalis*, before considering the way in which Leibniz deploys that jurisprudential thought in framing the *Novissima sinica* and the *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken* (and the 1698 letters which illuminate them).

I

In 1693, four years before the publication of *Novissima Sinica* and five years before beginning the "Disinterested Thoughts," Leibniz revealed the outlines of his *jurisprudence universelle* in the *Codex Iuris Gentium*:

a good man is one who loves everybody, so far as reason permits. Justice, then, which is the virtue which regulates that affection which the Greeks call philanthropy, will be most conveniently defined... as the charity of the wise man, that is, charity which follows the dictates of wisdom... Charity is a universal benevolence, and benevolence the habit of loving or of willing the good.

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Love then signifies rejoicing in the happiness of another... the happiness of those whose happiness pleases us turns into our own happiness, since things which please us are desired for their own sakes.³

And slightly later, in *La véritable piété* (1710), Leibniz indicated what this view of justice entails:

those who... reduce justice to [legal] 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 piety which they do not know at all, whatever appearance they create.⁴

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). 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 443d-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")⁵. 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. 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.

If one decomposes *caritas sapientis* into its parts, charity and wisdom, the provenance of both elements is clear enough—charity or love is the very heart of Christian ethics (St. Paul's "the greatest of these is charity" or St. John's "a new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another"), and the notion that justice requires the rule of the wise is famously Platonic. To be sure, it is not clear that a wisely charitable God would create a world which, though it maybe be "best," is not simply good; an *être infiniment parfait* might sooner contemplate his own

perfection, *ad infinitum*.⁶ And whether Judas or Pontius Pilate “could have” acted better, been more good-willing or benevolent, is notoriously problematical given Leibniz’ ideas of “substance” (or monad) and of divinely-determined preestablished harmony. Since, however, Leibniz is a supremely architectonic thinker who wants to relate everything to “first philosophy,” one cannot just cordon off his moral and political thought from his metaphysics and theology; that is precisely what he himself did not do.

Natural philosophy, which lies in the knowledge of God, of the soul, of minds, comes from natural light: it does not show itself therefore only in revealed theology, but serves as the unshakable base of the immense edifice of jurisprudence, of natural right, of the law of nations, of public law, of politics—in a word of all the laws of society.⁷

It was characteristic of Leibniz to try to establish, or rather discover, a “universal jurisprudence,” a system of justice and law common to God and man (and generally to any rational “substances”); anticipating Kant, Leibniz urged that justice and injustice “do not depend solely on human nature,” but on “the nature of intelligent substances in general.” As substance linked by intelligence, God and man exist for Leibniz in a “society or universal republic of spirits” which is “the noblest part of the universe,” a moral realm within physical nature, a realm in which “universal right is the same for God and for men.”⁸ Or, as Leibniz put it near the end of his life, in the *Mondadology*:

...the totality of all spirits must compose the City of God, that is to say, the most perfect state that is possible, under the most perfect of monarchs. This city of God, this truly universal monarchy, is a moral world in the natural world, and the most exalted among the works of God.⁹

For Leibniz, the difference between divine and human justice was one of degree, not kind; God’s justice is simply infinitely more perfect than men’s, and “to say...that God’s justice is different from men’s is like saying that the arithmetic or the geometry of men is false in heaven.” “As for the order of justice,” Leibniz wrote in 1696, “I believe that there are universal rules which must be valid as much with respect to God as with respect to intelligent creatures.” Intelligible truths “are universal, and what is true here below with respect to us is also such for the angels and for God himself.”¹⁰

What is important is that Leibniz used the Platonic notion of objectively certain “eternal verities” politically and morally to attack the idea of justice as bare superior power; the “formal notion” of justice, he observed in a commentary on Hobbes, has nothing to do with the mere “sovereign” command of authorities: “it does not

depend on the arbitrary laws of superiors, but on the eternal rules of wisdom and goodness, in men as well as in God.”¹¹ (Leibniz was soon to deploy this demi-Platonism, as will be seen, against any hyper-Calvinist notion that God operates through “absolute decrees,” not through reason-given *causae impulsivae*.)

For Leibniz it was merely an empiricist prejudice to see justice as “unreal” if it did not consist of tangible commands backed by power and threats. “The qualities of mind are not less real than those of body,” he wrote in a Platonizing passage in the *New Essays*. “It is true that you do not see justice as you see a horse, but you understand it no less, or rather you understand it better; it is no less in actions than directness or obliqueness is in motions.”¹² And if justice were simply derivative from the possession of power, “all powerful persons would be just, each in proportion to his power;” if an “evil genius” somehow seized supreme universal power, Leibniz insisted, he would not cease to be “wicked and unjust and tyrannical” simply because he could not be successfully “resisted.”¹³ Those who derive justice from irresistible power, he thought, simply confuse “right” and “law”: the concept of right cannot (by definition) be unjust, but law can be because it is “given and maintained by power;” only in God is there an absolute coincidence of right and power which produces just law.

Perhaps the finest mature statement of Leibniz’ view is contained in the *Opinion on the Principles of Pufendorf* (1706), which gained a European reputation through Barbeyrac’s translation:

Neither the norm of conduct itself, nor the essence of the just, depends on [God’s] free decision, but rather on eternal truths, objects of the divine intellect...Justice follows certain rules of equality and of proportion which are no less founded in the immutable nature of things, and in the divine ideas, than are the principles of arithmetic and of geometry...Divine justice and human justice have common rules which can be reduced to a system; and they must be taught in universal jurisprudence.¹⁴

Leibniz understood “justice” however, not just in terms of “wisdom” and of Platonic “eternal verity,” but in terms of charity and benevolence as well. And this is why he always defined justice as “the charity of the wise.” “The proper treatment of justice and that of charity cannot be separated,” he urged in one of his earliest writings. “Neither Moses, nor Christ, nor the Apostles nor the ancient Christians regulated justice otherwise than according to charity...[and] I, too, after having tried countless definitions of justice, finally felt myself satisfied only by this one; it alone I have found universal and reciprocal.”¹⁵ Charity is a universal benevolence, which the wise man carries into execution in conformity with the

measures of reason, to the end of obtaining the greatest good.” Charity, a “habit of loving” (with love defined as a “feeling of perfection” in others), necessitated voluntary action; it was to be regulated by wisdom, which could provide a knowledge of what men deserved through their “perfections.”

What is essential, for Leibniz, is that Christian “charity” and Platonic “wisdom” be in equilibrium: “General benevolence is charity itself. But the zeal of charity must be directed by knowledge so that we do not err in the estimation of what is best: since in consequence wisdom is the knowledge of the best or of felicity, we cannot perhaps better capture the essence of justice than if we define it as the charity which resides in the wise.”¹⁶

II

With the outlines of Leibniz’ universal jurisprudence in place—the claim that *iustitia est caritas sapientis seu benevolentia universalis* (“justice is the charity of the wise, that is universal benevolence”)—one can begin to turn to Leibniz’ use of this general doctrine in papers and letters from 1698. And it will be well to start with the “Disinterested Thoughts” on Protestant reunion which occupied much of that year (and which continued on until at least 1701).

No doubt Leibniz had “mixed motives,” both religious and political, in writing the *Unvorgreifliches Bedencken* with Abbot Molanus (for whom he would later write the *Opinion on the Principles of Pufendorf*, the definitive statement of his *jurisprudence universelle*, in 1706). If in the religious sphere Leibniz thought that *caritas* itself required the overcoming of “schism” and hatred, in the political forum he (and many others) had been alarmed by the damage done to North-European Protestant unity by the conversion of the (previously stoutly Lutheran) Elector of Saxony to Catholicism in 1697—with a view to being crowned King of Catholic Poland. So Leibniz had sufficient reason(s) to work for Protestant reconciliation and unity.¹⁷

To conciliate the Evangelical and the Reformed churches—Leibniz refused to use the names “Lutheran” and “Calvinist,” which he considered too personal and partisan, too inimical to charitable transcending of “schism”¹⁸—it would be sufficient to find *minimal* acceptable common ground between those churches. (Leibniz had insisted, after all, in a 1697 letter to James Cressett, the English ambassador to Hannover, that an “ecclesiastical tolerance” between Protestant sects is required “by the principle of Christian charity,” even if a full “*concorde de sentiments*” should be beyond reach.)¹⁹ Leibniz, however, pursues not the minimum but the *maximum* in the “Disinterested Thoughts”: he bases his argument not on a narrow common ground acceptable just to (closely related) Protestant sects, but on the

notion of that which is necessarily, universally true and/or right for all rational beings in the universe. And that is why he paraphrases Plato's *Euthyphro* (without naming it) in the key paragraph of the "Disinterested Thoughts"—for the point of the *Euthyphro* is that even the gods themselves see and know and love the "eternal verities" (mathematical and moral) which are valid for all "minds" in the cosmos, that the gods don't cause or make eternal truth by decree or a so-called "absolute" will.²⁰ This Platonizing moral universalism, which Leibniz was to turn against both radical Cartesian voluntarism and Calvinist "absolute decrees" (as will be seen shortly), was the basis of his *jurisprudence universelle* of "wise charity" and "universal benevolence"—a universal jurisprudence best outlined, in the present "Correspondence Vol. 15," by Leibniz' letter of January 1698 to Henrik von Eyben, which urges that "the whole of practical theology is indeed nothing other than a species of the highest jurisprudence, that is, the right of God [*de jure Dei*]," and that while each earthly *respublica* "has its own jurisprudence, so to speak," these individual justice-systems are subordinate to "the jurisprudence of the greatest city of all minds under the monarchy of God," which is the "*optima Respublica*."²¹ (And in a letter to the Florentine scholar Antonio Magliabechi from June 1698, Leibniz makes it clear that this universal justice in the "best commonwealth" has everything to do with "the nature of true love" or finding one's own pleasure "in the felicity of others": universal *caritas* requires the wise love of God and of one's neighbor.)²²

One doesn't really "need" Platonism just to bridge the (not too huge) differences between Calvinists and Lutherans; Leibniz uses Platonism, which goes well beyond his immediate, limited irenical needs, precisely because of his "global Platonism" (as René Sève has aptly called it).²³ It is revealing, indeed, that Leibniz should fall back on Plato's *Euthyphro* when something more modest, less radical, would be sufficient. ("Reason not the need"—or rather, go beyond what is narrowly, immediately *needed* to reason itself. For what reason dictates universally to all rational beings—even to the gods themselves in *Euthyphro*—will also be automatically valid for Lutherans and Calvinists. And a Christian-Platonist universalizing ecumenism will then later shape the *Theodicée*, viewed as a kind of proto-Kantian "religion within the limits of reason alone.") The theological fine-points of the "Disinterested Thoughts" are of greater interest to the history of theology than to the history of philosophy; but it is *philosophically* interesting that Leibniz should use Platonic rationalism to draw together two modern, north-European sects. Tertullian had famously asked, "If we have Jerusalem, what need have we of Athens?";²⁴ Leibniz uses "Athens" to bridge quarreling sides of a divided

“Jerusalem.” He enlists Plato to mediate between Luther and Calvin.

To see just how Leibniz deploys Platonic-rationalist universalism (in general) and the *Euthyphro* (in particular) in attempting a Lutheran-Calvinist *rapprochement*, it will be necessary (using a favorite Leibnizianism) “to step back the better to leap forward,” to step back to a brief general consideration of Leibniz demi-Platonism—according to which “the doctrine of Plato concerning metaphysics and morality is holy and just ... and everything he says about truth and the eternal ideas is truly admirable.”²⁵

What Leibniz found most worrying in Calvinism, as the 1698 letters will soon make clear, was the notion that by an “absolute decree” God willed the election of the saved and the reprobation of the damned—not from foreknowledge of good or bad use of faith and grace on the part of human beings, but simply as an exercise of unquestionable sovereign power. (*Euthyphro*, in ‘his’ dialogue, had urged that *whatever* the gods love counts as right, but Socrates refutes him; small wonder that Leibniz should view Calvin as a kind of *Euthyphro après la lettre*.) The idea of “tyrannical” divine *potestas*, undirected by any rational *causa impulsiva* or benevolent charity, Leibniz had eloquently denounced as morally intolerable near the beginning of the “Discourse on Metaphysics” (1686):

Why praise [God] for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the opposite? Where will his justice and his wisdom be found if nothing is left but a certain despotic power, if will takes the place of reason, and if, according to the definition of tyrants [Thrasymachus’ definition of justice in Plato’s *Republic*], that which is pleasing to the most powerful is by that very fact just?²⁶

Almost exactly the same kind of tyranny-rejecting language appears in Leibniz’ letter of March 1698 to his collaborator Molanus (“Correspondence Vol. 15,” no. 208): “every act of divine will has a determining reason [*causa impulsiva*], otherwise God would not be supremely wise.” Condemning the notion of willful divine “tyranny” yet again, Leibniz makes Christ himself speak against it—and in Greek, the language of Plato. But it is in a slightly later letter to Molanus that Leibniz expands his Christian-Platonist objections to Calvinist “absolutism”:

God does not act through absolute power alone, without reason, as would a tyrant, and it is always his supreme wisdom which makes him choose the best—though the reasons for this depth of his counsel may be unknown to us. Thus the love of God and the respect which we owe him is not injured at all; his wisdom, his goodness, and his justice remain in their entirety, as well as his power and his supreme right ... This sovereign maser does not act without

reason, or by some obscure movement of his power alone, which would be the act of a tyrant, but through reasons (however unknown to us) which his perfections furnish to him: in a word, sovereign wisdom has as much of a role as sovereign power.²⁷

(Sections 175-178 of the *Theodicee*, a decade later, merely amplify these complaints about “tyranny” in the 1698 letter to Molanus.)

The Platonic-rationalist anti-voluntarism outlined in this letter to his collaborator had been long-aimed by Leibniz not just against the more radical forms of Calvinist theology, but against Descartes’ even more thoroughgoing and extreme voluntarism in the *Reply to the Six Objections*. Descartes had insisted that:

It is self-contradictory that the will of God should not have been from eternity indifferent to all that has come to pass or that will ever occur, because we can form no conception of anything good or true... the idea of which existed in the divine understanding before God’s will determined him to act.²⁸

One of the most consistent things in Leibniz’ philosophical development was his hostility to such hyper-creationist notions, as an early (1677) letter of his shows: “I know that it is the opinion of Descartes that the truth of things depends on the divine will. This has always seemed absurd to me ... Who would say that A is non-A because God has decreed it?”²⁹

In the history of philosophy the idea that the concept of justice, as an “eternal verity,” is not a mere adjunct of power, that it is an idea whose necessary truth is at least analogous to the truths of mathematics and logic, is commonly associated with Plato. Now while it is not true that Leibniz was a Platonist in any doctrinaire sense—his clinging to Pauline “charity” and to Augustinian “good will” would have made that difficult—nonetheless he did agree with Plato on many points of fundamental importance. “I have always been quite content, since my youth,” he wrote to Remond in 1715, “with the moral philosophy of Plato, and even in a way with his metaphysics; for those two sciences accompany each other, like mathematics and physics.”³⁰

With the possible exception of the *Republic*, the Platonic work which Leibniz admired most—at least for use in moral and political philosophy—was the *Euthyphro*, which he paraphrased almost literally in his most important work on justice, the “Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice.” In the *Euthyphro*, which deals with the question whether “the rules of goodness and of justice are anterior to the decrees of God” (in Leibniz’ words), Plato “makes Socrates uphold the truth on that point.”³¹ And that truth is, as Ernst Cassirer puts it, that the good and the just are “not the product but the objective aim and the motive of his will.”³²

The opening lines of Leibniz' "Meditation" on justice merely convert Platonic dialogue into straightforward prose:

It is agreed that whatever God wills is good and just. But there remains the question whether it is good and just because God wills it or whether God wills it because it is good and just: in other words, whether justice and goodness are arbitrary, or whether they belong to the necessary and eternal truths about the nature of things, as do numbers and proportions.³³

And Leibniz then goes on, in the "Meditation," to equate Hobbes with the Thrasymachus who had viewed justice not as geometrically "eternal" but as the product of the will of the powerful.

Leibniz' devotion to the doctrine of Plato's *Euthyphro* is clear not just in the "Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice" (and then later in the *Theodicy*), but in the slightly earlier "Unvorgreifliches Bedencken" (c. 1698-1701), which (as we have seen) he wrote partly to counter the extreme Calvinist view that God creates everything *ex nihilo* through his "fullness of power" (*plenitudo potestatis*) and creative "will" alone. One must consider, Leibniz now says, "whether the will of God really makes right [*das Recht*], and whether something is good and right simply because God wills it, or whether God wills it because it is good and right in itself [*an sich gut und recht ist*]." The radical voluntarist view of justice as a divine "product" Leibniz ascribes to a number of now-obscure Calvinist theologians, but also to those Cartesians "who teach that two times two makes four and three times three makes nine, for no other reason [*Ursach*] than that God wills it."³⁴ (To lump Descartes with second-hand Calvinists was a rather uncharitable joke, given that Descartes offered his creationist voluntarism as a kind of evidence of orthodoxy: what greater sacrifice could a philosopher make than to concede that God makes truth?)

But such a radically voluntarist position, for Leibniz, is as calamitous morally and theologically as it is mathematically: for on such a view "the *aeternae veritates* would have no certainty in themselves, and even the *bonitas et justitia dei* would be only extrinsic denominations, and in fact would be groundless, if their truth derived from God's will alone. *Si tantum staret pro ratione voluntas*." Those who say, Leibniz adds, that "God wills the evil of punishment without regard to the evil of sin," that he wills to "eternally damn" men even before "any of their sins come into play," forget that such a view "in no way abides with God's justice, goodness, and charity."³⁵ (The last clause is a conscious re-working of I Corinthians 13, "Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three"; Leibniz replaces "faith" and "hope" with two additional *moral* virtues.) For if God's decree were "quite absolute, and

had no *causam impulsivam* whatsoever, then God would be an acceptor of persons, through election, and would deal with men as a tyrant with his underlings... for no other reason than *sic volo sic jubeo*.”³⁶ (This phrase from Juvenal’s *Satire VI*, line 223, continues with another phrase which had great weight with Leibniz: the whole sentence reads *Hoc volo, sic jubeo, sit pro ratione voluntas*, and was understood by Leibniz to say, “Thus I will do, thus I ordain, my will takes the place of reason.”)

Leibniz’ insistence on “God’s justice, goodness and charity” as an antidote to absolutism and “tyranny” is brought out in a crucial paragraph of the *Unvorgreifliches Bedencken* (and then echoed in the 1698 letters to Molanus). In the “Disinterested Thoughts” Leibniz urges that:

the divine attributes must necessarily be compatible, or, as it is explained by our theologians, harmoniously united [*harmonica*]. God, though he is not only charitable [*barmherzig*] but charity itself, can nonetheless undertake no exercise of it which goes against his justice—and also no exercise of his justice through which his charity would be left behind.³⁷

Any exercise of divine omnipotence [*Allmacht*], Leibniz goes on to say, must be limited by God’s “goodness” and “wisdom”—leading finally to “justice” [*Gerechtigkeit*]. This same *Gerechtigkeit* is insisted on by Leibniz, over and over, in his long and important letter to Molanus of July 18, 1698 (“Correspondence Vol. 15,” pp. 702-708)—especially in the paragraph in which Leibniz treats Christ as “a just judge” for charitably saving “the woman taken in adultery” (*John VIII*, 15) from the legal penalty of death by stoning, for benevolently saying “Go, and sin no more” (p. 704). (It is not surprising that Leibniz should give primacy to the Johannine Gospel—which in effect “foresees” Leibniz’ notion of *caritas sapientis* and *benevolentia*.)

Leibniz goes on to say, in the “Unvorgreifliches Bedencken,” that “the eternal truths of goodness and justice, of ratio and proportion,” as well as all other “necessary truths,” have “their ground in the eternal being of God himself: not, however, in his free decree.” And finally he plays the “ontological proof” trump card: if all truths were divinely caused *ex nihilo*, then the truth about the necessary existence of God himself (as revealed by St. Anselm) would be “a product of the free will of God, which is absurd in the highest degree [*absurdissimum*].”³⁸ In that passage, Plato triumphs over Euthyphro-Thrasymachus-Descartes-Hobbes one last time.

It is a standard Platonic method (and one much appreciated by Leibniz) to throw light on morally problematical and elusive notions, such as “justice” and “virtue,” by attempting to relate them to (or sometimes indeed to equate them with) the

“necessary” truths of mathematics and geometry which all rational beings see in the mind’s eye. That is the clearest in the *Meno*, where a discussion between Socrates and Meno over the nature of “virtue” gets bogged down until Socrates takes aside Meno’s utterly uneducated slave and shows (in effect) that any rational being has within him what we would now call *a priori* knowledge of mathematical and geometrical truth which cannot be “learned,” but which can be drawn out and brought to full consciousness by Socratic probing.

After Socrates draws this pure rational knowledge from Meno’s slave the conversation turns from geometry back to virtue; and we now learn (*Meno* 89a ff.) that “virtue is knowledge”—much as mathematics and geometry are knowledge.³⁹ The structure of the *Meno*—first virtue, then geometry, then virtue again—makes no sense at all unless Plato is trying to suggest that moral knowledge is logically like mathematical-geometrical knowledge: necessary, universal, eternal, not subject to Heraclitean flux, loved by the gods (who do not “cause” it in time), and so on. And if the first of the virtues is justice, and if justice is a psychic-cosmic “harmony” or equilibrium, and if harmony is (in effect) “mathematics made audible,” then justice will be a kind of “participation” in the beautiful mathematical order which links the well-tuned, consonant *psyche* to an equally non-dissonant *polis* (or *psyche* “writ large”), and then to “the harmony of the spheres”—as in *Republic* 443d-e.

Leibniz’ “Platonism”—his tendency to say, in the manner of the *Phaedo*, that all “absolute ideas” are on a plane of logical equality (reason-provided, universal, changeless)—is clear from the earliest period of his life to the latest; it is evident, for example, in the *Elements of Law and Equity* which he wrote in 1669-70 (at the age of twenty-three).

The doctrine of law belongs to those sciences that are not built on experiments but on definitions, not on the senses but on demonstrations according to reason; it deals with questions, as we say, of law and not of fact [*juris non facti*]. Since “justice consists in a certain harmony and proportion, its meaning remains independent of whether anybody actually does justice to others, or conversely, is treated justly. The same holds for numerical relationships... Hence it is not surprising that the propositions of these sciences possess eternal truth.

These mathematical and jurisprudential “sciences,” he adds, “also do not take their point of departure from the senses, but from a clear and distinct intuition or, as Plato called it, *Idea*, a word which itself signifies discernment or definition.”⁴⁰

This notion of an intellectual “intuition” which yields ethics as well as math-

ematics Leibniz traces not just to *Phaedo* (and *Euthyphro*), but to *Meno* as well; and he makes it plain in proposition 26 of the “Discourse on Metaphysics” that the doctrine of *Meno* is fundamentally correct if that dialogue is relieved of certain “Pythagorean” extravagances: “the soul virtually knows those things, and needs only to be reminded (animadverted) to recognize the truths.” If the *Meno* is “purged of the error of pre-existence,” it “contains a great deal of truth”⁴¹—truth which Leibniz will soon go on to praise in the “Platonic” part of *Novissima Sinica*.

III

With the Christian-Platonist foundations of Leibniz’ “universal jurisprudence” more or less in place—with Platonic “geometrical” wisdom, Pauline “love,” and Augustinian “good will” fused in the phrase, *Justitia est caritas sapientis seu benevolentia universalis*—one can move on to the way in which Leibniz deploys his *jurisprudence universelle* in the *Novissima Sinica*, and especially in the “new” letters concerning “Latest News from China” which are to be found in “Correspondence Vol. 15.”

It is usually said that Leibniz’ serious study of Chinese civilization was occasioned (or at least greatly encouraged) by his meeting with Father Claudio Filippo Grimaldi in Rome in 1689. (Father Grimaldi, who was President of the Mathematical Tribunal in Peking, was one of the leading figures in the Jesuit enterprise of finding an accommodation between Chinese and Western thought.) In section 8 of the Preface to the *Novissima Sinica*, Leibniz says that he remembers Father Grimaldi’s “telling me in Rome how much he admired the virtue and wisdom” of the Chinese ruler, whose “love of justice” and “charity to the populace” were so meritorious; but he goes on quickly to say that “Grimaldi asserted that the [Chinese] monarch’s marvelous desire for knowledge almost amounted to a faith,” and that this faith-knowledge was revealed by the fact that (after years of Euclidean study) “the emperor prepared a book on geometry, that he might...bequeath the wisdom he had brought into his empire as an inheritance to his realm, having in view the happiness of his people even in posterity.”⁴² There immediately follows a “Platonic” passage, clearly traceable to the virtue-geometry linkage in the *Meno*, in which knowledge of geometry (as something “amounting” to a faith) is crucial:

Now geometry ought not to be regarded as the sphere of workmen but of philosophers; for, since every virtue flows from wisdom, and the spirit of wisdom is truth, those who thoroughly investigate the demonstrations of geometers have perceived the nature of eternal truth, and are able to tell the certain from the uncertain; other mortals waver amid guesses, and, not knowing the truth, almost ask with [Pontius] Pilate, what it is. But there is no doubt

that the monarch of the Chinese saw very plainly what in our part of the world Plato formerly taught, that no one can be educated in the mysteries of the sciences except through geometry...The strength of our geometry, as soon as it was tested by the king, was so much to his liking that he easily came to believe that those who had learned thus to reason might teach correctly in other things.⁴³

Here, as in *Meno*, “every virtue flows from wisdom:” a geometry-loving ruler who cannot have absorbed “Augustinian” grace is nonetheless both just and charitable. In this astonishing part of the *Novissima Sinica*, indeed, one finds *Meno*’s virtual equation of knowledge, geometry, virtue, and justice—and this “amounts” to the (unorthodox) faith which a Chinese ruler might have. And if that ruler knows “eternal truth” and is just and charitable, he is (in effect) a better Christian than Louis XIV, the self styled Rex Christianissimus (whom Leibniz called Mars Christianissimus).⁴⁴ In the preface to the *Novissima Sinica* all good things—truth, wisdom, Platonic geometry, charity, justice, virtue, popular happiness—are strongly related to one another, if not fully equated. The Chinese ruler is wise, knows the “eternal truths”; he is just and charitable. But if he is wise and charitable, is that not *caritas sapientis*? By contrast Pontius Pilate lacks wisdom (“what is truth?”) and is neither just nor charitable: he permits the judicial murder of Christ, who did the most to make charity *the* central virtue on earth. It is no accident that the wisely charitable virtues of an enlightened ruler—a “Platonic” geometer—are contrasted with the weak viciousness of Pilate: Leibniz could have pitched upon many bad rulers, but he singled out the one who publicly executed *caritas*’ embodiment (and who served as a kind of forerunner to Louis XIV in his more uncharitable exploits). East is East, but East is also West—when the protection of charity is at stake. As Leibniz urged in a poem (1697) for Mlle. de Scudéry,

*Qu’ on soit Européen, Chinois, mondain en somme,
La magnanimité n’y regarde que l’homme.*⁴⁵

And as he said in a letter to Mlle. de Scudéry from January 1698, thanking her for praising his poem [“Correspondence Vol. 15,” p. 220], “If there is anything good in these verses,” it lies in the fact that he hopes through them to mark his “zeal for the public” by celebrating not the bellicose and violent actions of Louis XIV as Mars Christianissimus, but rather his occasional “pacific” actions which “now work for the happiness of men and for the glory of God.” As for Louis’ endless wars, Leibniz adds, he can praise them “neither as a German, nor as a citizen of the universe.”⁴⁶ In the “new” 1698 letter, as in the 1697 poem, what matters is “magnanimity towards men” (*en général*), viewed not as German or

French or Chinese nationals but as “citizens of the universe”. That is of course congruent with Leibniz’ familiar moral-political universalism: “I seek the good of mankind. I am neither a phil-Hellene nor a philo-Roman, but a *philanthropos*.”⁴⁷ And if a charitable Chinese emperor is more magnanimous than a violent French king, then a *citoyen de l’univers* should praise a monarch who is praiseworthy.

Leibniz doesn’t confine his praise to the “charity” and the “wisdom”—*caritas sapientis!*—of the Chinese emperor, however; he finds wise charity and love and benevolence concretely *realized* in existing Chinese moral and political practices. The Chinese, he urges, “behave to each other so lovingly” that they “despise everything which creates or nourishes ferocity in men”—to the point that, “almost in emulation of the higher teachings of Christ,” they are “averse to war.” (And what is the “higher” teaching of Christ, if not “a new law I give unto you, that ye love one another?”—from the Gospel according to St. John). Indeed Leibniz insists that the Chinese “surpass us [Europeans] in comprehending the precepts of civil life...certainly they surpass us...in practical philosophy, that is in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to present life and use of mortals.” For Leibniz, “the laws of the Chinese...are directed to the achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order.” And that “order” is *needed*, for

...Certainly by their own doing men suffer the greatest evils and in turn inflict them upon each other. It is truly said that “man is a wolf to man.” Our folly is indeed great, but quite universal. We, exposed as we are to natural injuries, heap woes on ourselves, as though they were lacking from elsewhere.

What harm, then, if some nation has found a remedy [for these evils]? Certainly the Chinese above all others have attained a higher standard. In a vast multitude of men they have virtually accomplished more than the founders of religious orders among us have achieved within their own narrow ranks. So great is the obedience toward superiors and reverence toward elders, so religious, almost, is the relation of children toward parents, that for children to contrive anything violent against their parents, even by word, is almost unheard of, and the perpetrator seems to atone for his actions even as we make a parricide pay for his deed...Moreover, there is among equals, or those having little obligation to one another, a marvelous respect, and an established order of duties.⁴⁸

By contrast, Leibniz urges, in Europe “respect and careful conversation last for hardly more than the first few days of a new acquaintance...[and soon] circumspection is gladly put away for a sort of freedom which is quickly followed by contempt, backbiting, anger, and afterwards enmity.” (Then, in section 5 of

Novissima Sinica—perhaps fearing that he has uncharitably maligned the Europeans—Leibniz quickly says that “the Chinese do not attain to full and complete virtue” because they lack “heaven’s grace and Christian teaching.”⁴⁹ But if their “loving” conduct already manifests “emulation of the higher teachings of Christ,” then surely the (lower) “teachings” which they don’t yet know can’t be as crucial as Pauline love: for “the greatest of these is charity.” Even if they lack faith, they don’t lack the love which matters *more*.)

In the moral-political sphere, then, Leibniz doesn’t have to recommend mere “Jesuitical” *accommodation* of Chinese practices—for in the practical sphere China is superior. And that is why Leibniz can say, in a 1697 letter to Joachim Bouvet, that with respect to “the morality and the politics of the Chinese, it seems effectively that they have excellent rules for good order in civil affairs”—so that “it is to be hoped that one day we [in the West] will have all the details.”⁵⁰ (This 1697 letter reveals what Leibniz means when in a January 1698 letter to Bouvet [“Correspondence Vol. 15.” p. 199], he slightly vaguely calls China *ce Grand Empire*: the “greatness” is mainly moral and political.) To be sure, we cannot know how far Leibniz really believed in Chinese moral-political superiority; but for practical philosophy it doesn’t matter if he is idealizing China and then using that utopian “ideal type” (in the Weberian sense) to criticize modern European morals—much as Rousseau used Sparta to chastise modern Europeans in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750), and as Montesquieu used Persia for similar ends in the *Lettres persanes*. For Leibniz’s philosophical purposes, it need only be (in principle) possible that some human beings be as “wise” and as “charitable” as (he says) the Chinese are.

To be sure, the Chinese are without Christian “grace,” as Leibniz notes. But one can wonder how much that matters, given his insistence in the *Nouveaux essais* that:

We are fortunate that God is more charitable than men...One can, after all, maintain that when God gives them [the pagans] grace sufficient to call forth an act of contrition, he also gives them... all the light of faith and all the fervor which they need for their salvation...so it is not very out of the way to grant as much, at least at the point of death, to persons of good who will have not had the advantage of being instructed in Christianity, in the ordinary way. But the wisest course is to take no position regarding things of which so little is known, and to be satisfied with the general belief that God can do nothing which is not entirely good and just.⁵¹

This is an extraordinary paragraph: under the orthodox guise of preserving

“grace,” “salvation,” and “faith,” what really matters is a (not necessarily Christian) “good will” which a just and good divinity must respect. In these passages from the *New Essays* Leibniz reinforces the view that particular sectarian doctrines which are incongruent with universal jurisprudence must be set aside in favor of charity and goodness—the same moral principles which Leibniz used in urging Bossuet to help restore the *respublica christiana* by leaving out of account problematical theological points which cause dissension rather than concord and consensus.⁵²

In a letter to Philippe Naudé, written only a few years after the *New Essays* (in 1707), Leibniz insists again that in order to “justify the actions of God,” one must grant that “his goodness ought not to be taken into account less than his other perfections,” and that “it injures his justice to believe for example that...men who have been living well morally, though they have never heard Jesus Christ spoken of, are eternally damned for that.” Such “unreasonable dogmas” lead to a “decrying of Christianity”; they are not congruent with charity as something even more important than faith and grace.⁵³

Certainly, for Leibniz in the *Novissima Sinica*, the Chinese are “men who have been living well morally”—for they (as a people) are “loving” and “respectful,” and their monarch is “just,” “charitable” and geometrically “wise.” Indeed Leibniz hints in a “new,” unpublished letter to the Jesuit father Daniel Papebroch (“Correspondence Vol. 15,” pp. 150-151) that since “charity is better than hoping,” the already-charitable Chinese are (in effect) more Pauline than official Christians who have more *spes* and *fides* than *caritas*—thereby inverting the love-dominated moral order of *I Corinthians* xiii. Leibniz, indeed, briefly fears for European civilization:

I fear that we may soon become inferior to the Chinese in all branches of knowledge. I do not say this because I grudge them new light; rather I rejoice. But it is desirable that they in turn teach us those things which are especially in our interest: the greatest use of practical philosophy and a more perfect manner of living, to say nothing now of their other arts. Certainly the condition of our affairs, slipping as we are into ever greater corruption, seems to be such that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology. And so I believe that if someone expert, not in the beauty of goddesses but in the excellence of peoples, were selected as judge, the golden apple would be awarded to the Chinese, unless we should win by virtue of one great but superhuman thing, namely, the divine gift of the Christian religion.⁵⁴

But how far is “the Christian religion” really needed for “the more perfect manner of living” which Leibniz thinks to be *already* realized in Chinese practices? Here it will be helpful to look at Leibniz’ remarkable letter of January/February 1697 to Father Grimaldi himself.

“The goodness of God is so great,” Leibniz begins, “that even those to whom [Christian] revelation has never been presented are aided by another kind of grace [*alio gratiae*] which will never be lacking to them, provided that they are not themselves lacking in good will.” For “moved by the contemplation of nature, and aided internally from on high,” they can “love above all that which they take to be superior to everything in beauty and in perfection”—to the point that “finally, their souls thus prepared, God will spill the light of faith into them.” One must therefore, Leibniz continues, “strive to excite in [all] hearts the love of god on which Christ insisted so much, and which reason itself recommends to us.” But to see the “beauty and perfection” of God (which can generate love), one needs modern science—for “it is certain...that no one can be loved if his beauty remains always veiled to our sight, and that the power and the wisdom which makes the beauty of the supreme intelligence strike our eyes...cannot be better revealed to us than by knowledge of the marvels which constitute his workmanship.”⁵⁵

Here science, not revelation, reveals God. But Leibniz then shifts from theory to practice, from knowledge to action:

From this it results that there are three things to be done in order to augment in us the natural light of divinity: first, to form a complete record of the marvels which have already been discovered; next, to work to discover a greater number of them; finally to relate all these discoveries, past and future, to the praise of the supreme master of the universe, and to the growth of the love of God, which cannot be sincere in us without also including charity toward men. If we were sufficiently fortunate in having a great monarch who one day took these three points to heart, we would advance more in ten years, for the glory of God and the happiness of the human race, then would otherwise be done in several centuries.⁵⁶

From *Novissima Sinica* we know that, for Leibniz, “charity toward men” and “a great monarch” are already *in place* in China. And that is why he says, only half-jokingly, that “we are sending missionaries to the Indies to preach revealed religion, which is all very well. But it seems that we should have need for the Chinese to send us missionaries in their turn, to teach us the natural religion that we have lost.”⁵⁷ For it is the (already) “loving” and “charitable” Chinese who—in

practice—are better proto-Christians than uncharitable Louis XIV or Charles II.

Leibniz was clear, after all, that what matters most in social life is a charitable and benevolent ruler: it is “necessary,” he urges in the *Lettre sur l’éducation l’un prince*, that a statesman be “a man of good will, a courageous man, a man of judgment, and an honorable man”—for the *homme de bien* will have “great feelings of piety, of justice and charity, and will apply himself strongly to his duty.”⁵⁸ Such a statesman, according to the *Novissima Sinica*, is already at the helm of China—but not in England or in France. Even if Leibniz was “idealizing” the Chinese and their ruler, that still shows clearly what he admired in the political and moral sphere. And what he admired was “wise charity” and “universal benevolence,” whether he found it in Paris, Berlin, Hannover...or China.

(Almost wholly new, by the way, in Leibniz’ reflections on China in “Correspondence Vol. 15,” is the thought that not only Jesuits should flourish in the Far East—that Protestant missionaries should do so as well. Thus in a letter to Gilbert Burnet, Archbishop of Salisbury [April 1698, p. 479], Leibniz insists that “it concerns the honor and the duty of the Protestants not to permit that the party of Rome arrogate to itself the missions of this great empire—the more so because they [the Catholics] succeed there only as masters of the European sciences, in which the Protestants (to say the least of it) do not yield to them.” Though Boyle is now dead, Leibniz adds, Protestant England and Holland still have scientific eminences who can impress the Chinese—as “Platonic” geometry once impressed their wisely charitable ruler.)

IV

To be sure, Leibniz thought that English and Dutch scientific geniuses should find their *main* charitable scope in Europe, not as China-missionaries; and in a wonderfully characteristic letter to Hendrik Van Bleiswyck (January 3, 1698), “Correspondence” pp. 154-155), he reveals his view of the social responsibilities of great scientists.

As for M. Leuwenhoeck, I grant that he has some reason to make a secret of his manner of [microscopic] observation, which deserves to be respected. But if the public gives him encouragement to be aided by his pupils, he would be very wrong if he continued to make difficulties... For by this means he will make ten observations for every one, [and] treasures of knowledge will be discovered which perhaps would otherwise remain unknown for a long time to come...[and] besides these kinds of discoveries will be able to serve even in medicine, and contribute one day to relieving the human race. Thus Christian charity enters the picture... For me, who esteem these [scientific] works infi-

nity above these of a Raphael of Urbino or of a Michelangelo, I believe that Delft could in this way honor itself in the Republic of Letters, and that this fine city, celebrated as it already is through its Delphic Oracle, that is the incomparable Grotius, would secure a notable increase in its glory by contributing to a considerable enlightening of the secrets of nature.

Since this paragraph sums up *all* of Leibniz' practical ideals with rare eloquence, one cannot do better than to stop here—even if his 1698 letters to Andreas Morell illuminate what he means by a “disinterested” love which avoids Fénelonian “quietism,” and even if his letter to Electress Sophie of Hannover throws light on his view of the efficacy of prayer. Leibniz' “Correspondence Vol. 15” is so rich that some of it will simply have to be saved for another day—not surprisingly, since he left some 20,000 letters.

Professor Patrick Riley
Oakeshott Professor of Political and Moral Philosophy (Wisconsin)
c/o Department of Government
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

Notes

¹ See Wenchao Li and Hans Poser, eds., *Das Neueste über China: G.W. Leibnizens Novissima Sinica von 1697* (*Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa* 33), Stuttgart 1999, “Einleitung.”

² Gr. I, 426 ff.

³ Dutens IV, 3, 287 ff.

⁴ Gr. II, 500.

⁵ *I Corinthians* xiii (KJV).

⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1178b.

⁷ Leibniz, “Unvorgreifliche Gedancken,” Dutens VI, ii, 11-12.

⁸ T, Prelim. Diss. Pt. 35, 94.

⁹ Leibniz, “Monadology” props. 85-86 (Latta trans. Oxford 1898, 267-268).

¹⁰ Leibniz, to Sophie (1696), Gr. I, 379.

¹¹ Leibniz, *Reflections on Hobbes' Liberty Necessity and Chance* T, 403.

¹² NE III, 1, 12 (A VI, 6, 303).

¹³ Leibniz, *Observationes de principio iuris*, ix (Dutens IV, 3, 270 ff.)

¹⁴ Dutens IV, 3, 275 (also *Political Writings*, ed. Rdey, 66 ff.)

¹⁵ Leibniz, *Elementa iuris naturalis*, A VI, 481

- ¹⁶ Leibniz, *De Iustitia et novo codice*, Gr. II, 621-622
- ¹⁷ P. Schrecker, Leibniz, *Lettres et fragments inédits* (Paris 1934), 12 ff., esp. 35-36.
- ¹⁸ See Leibniz' letter to Molanus (October 1699) Schrecker, *Lettres*, op. Cit., 96.
- ¹⁹ A, I, 14, 690-691.
- ²⁰ *Euthyphro* 9e-10e .
- ²¹ A, I, 15, 137.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 645.
- ²³ René Sève, *Le droit de la raison* (Paris 1994), 18n.
- ²⁴ Tertullian, *De praescriptiones hereticorum*, VII.
- ²⁵ Leibniz, letter to Huet (1679), Dutens V, 458 ff.
- ²⁶ DM, prop. 2.
- ²⁷ A, I, 16 (forthcoming 1999-2000) [also in Schrecker, *Lettres*, op. cit., p. 95].
- ²⁸ Cited in Riley, *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence* (1996), p. 23.
- ²⁹ Leibniz, to Eckhard (1677), L, 181.
- ³⁰ G, III, 637.
- ³¹ T (Huggard), II, 182, 240-24 1.
- ³² E. Cassirer, *Leibniz' System* (Marburg 1902), 428-495.
- ³³ Leibniz, "Meditation on ...Justice," in *Political Writings*, ed. Riley, 45.
- ³⁴ Leibniz, "Unvorgreifliches Bedencken," Gr. I, 428 ff.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 441.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 430.
- ³⁸ Leibniz, "Unvorgreifliches Bedencken," Gr. I, 433.
- ³⁹ See also *Republic* VII, 526 ff.
- ⁴⁰ Leibniz, *Elementa iuris naturalis* A VI, I.
- ⁴¹ DM, prop. 26.
- ⁴² Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica, Praefatio*, in *Writings on China*, ed. Cook-Rosemont (Lasalle 1994), 49-50.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50-53.
- ⁴⁴ In his satire (1683) by that name: in *Political Writings*, ed. Riley, pp. 134 ff.
- ⁴⁵ A, I, 14, 752.
- ⁴⁶ A, I, 15, 220.
- ⁴⁷ Leibniz, to des Billettes, L, 775.
- ⁴⁸ Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica* (Cook-Rosemont ed.), 47.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ⁵⁰ A, I, 14, 830.

⁵¹ NE IV, xviii, A VI, 6 (Remnant-Bennett p. 502).

⁵² See Leibniz' correspondence with Bossuet, F de C II, *passim*.

⁵³ Gr. II, 501.

⁵⁴ Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica* (Cook-Rosemont ed.), 51.

⁵⁵ Dutens V, 75 ff; A, I, 13, 515 ff.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Leibniz, *Novissima Sinica* (Cook-Rosemont ed.), 51.

⁵⁸ Leibniz, *Lettre sur l'éducation d'un prince*, A IV, 3, 542 ff.