Leibniz and the Political Theology of the Chinese

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Resumo: Neste artigo, reconsidero os contextos ético-políticos e políticos teológicos da recepção e interpretação de Leibniz sobre a cultura e o pensamento políticos chineses. Este estudo examina a filosofia política e a "teologia política" de Leibniz para esclarecer como ele interpretou o sistema político chinês e o pensamento político confucionista como um modelo de realeza iluminada e benevolente enraizada na teologia natural no contexto do Iluminismo primitivo. Esta abordagem - articulada com diferentes graus de entusiasmo em pensadores como Leibniz, Wolff, Bilfinger e Voltaire - no período posterior e pós-Iluminismo - em pensadores como Herder, Kant e Hegel - se tornaram um modelo dos abusos de o poder absoluto e representam a obediência e a heteronomia do antigo regime tanto quanto do "Oriente". A idéia ocidental da China como um regime ahistórico e atemporal de "despotismo oriental" foi moldada por disputas sobre a relação apropriada entre política e religião e monarquia iluminada e autodeterminação popular durante o longo século XVIII.
Palavras-chave: Leibniz; recepção; pensamento chines; teologia política; political philosophy; religião e história e despotismo oriental.

Abstract: In this paper, I reconsider the ethical-political and political theological contexts of Leibniz's reception and interpretation of Chinese political culture and thought. This study examines Leibniz's political philosophy and "political theology" in order to clarify how he interpreted the Chinese political system and Confucian political thought as providing a model of benevolent enlightened kingship rooted in natural theology in the context of the early Enlightenment. This approach — articulated with varying degrees of enthusiasm in thinkers "such as Leibniz, Wolff, Bilfinger, and Voltaire — would in the later and post-Enlightenment period — in thinkers such as Herder, Kant, and Hegel — become a model of the abuses of absolute power and represent the obedience and heteronomy of the *ancien régime* as much as of the "Orient." The Western idea of China as an ahistorical and timeless regime of "Oriental despotism" was shaped by disputes over the appropriate relationship between politics and religion and enlightened monarchy and popular self-determination during the long eighteenth-century.
Keywords: Leibniz; reception; cheinese thought; political theology; political philosophy; religion end oriental despotism.

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Introduction[2]

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) was born during the chaotic period of the concluding years of the Thirty Years' War. The political and religious conflicts of his epoch that devastated central Europe have been used to explain his sensibility that aimed at philosophical, political, and religious accommodation and reconciliation. Leibniz's polymathic synthesizing efforts at reconciling diverse elements have led interpreters to highlight different tendencies in his project. Leibniz practical thought has been portrayed as conservative and as reformist, as oriented toward conserving the threatened past and toward furthering the development of enlightenment, modernity, and progress that threatened that heritage.[3] Rather than representing or embodying a disjunction between the ancients and the moderns, in which Leibniz must be categorized as belonging to either one camp or the other, Leibniz would be more appropriately interpreted as both a conservative and reformer. He simultaneously hearkens back to the pre-modern wisdom of the ancients while pursuing a modernizing philosophical and practical project.

This complex configuration of the "simultaneity" of tradition and reform is characteristic not only of Leibniz's practical philosophy. It also arguably describes an intellectual figure, and the tradition associated with his name, which fascinated Leibniz and other early Enlightenment intellectuals (Davis, 1983). These include — with different degrees of enthusiasm — Leibniz, Wolff, Bilfinger, Diderot, and Voltaire. The figure of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子) has seen multiple incompatible interpretive avatars in modern Western thought from a superstitious pagan and simplistic moralist to a reactionary founder of Oriental despotism to a figure of enlightened morally oriented political rule guided by tradition and reform insofar as both embody ethical ideals. Unlike Bayle and Malebranche, or later Herder, Kant, and Hegel, Leibniz's reception of Confucian China belongs to the more positive appropriation of Chinese thought. Leibniz's engagement on behalf of Chinese and Confucian ethics and politics resonates with his own ethical and political thought.

Leibniz was able through the circuitous transmission of Chinese thought from East to West through the Jesuit missionaries and others to develop his own analysis of its significance. He detected affinities between his own thought and that of an alien and distant Chinese cultural and intellectual tradition. This sentiment is not completely inappropriate. The early Ruist 儒家 (Confucian) thinkers were born into a period of war and its quest for stability — whether it is rooted in the moral nature of human beings (Mencius 孟子) or externally imposed through effort by a strict and rigorous moral-political order (Xunzi 荀子) — has been interpreted as a response to the reality of conflict and instability.

Leibniz described his endeavors as preserving and redeeming the wisdom of the ancients — which had fallen into disrepute after the development of the new sciences, mathematics, and philosophy — in accord with the innovations in knowledge and practice of the present. The dispute between the ancients and the moderns in modern European philosophy, which Leibniz attempted to resolve, is repeated in modern European reception of Chinese philosophy and religion. The legitimacy of contemporary Chinese thought and culture is not only evaluated according to internal Western standards but also according to the contemporary Western reconstruction of the wisdom of the ancient Chinese that attempted to identify and contrast it with Jewish and Greek wisdom.

In this context, Confucius is perceived to be concurrently an inheritor of the past and an

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2 Note that this chapter incorporates elements from and relies in part on the interpretation of Leibniz's political philosophy summarized in (Nelson, 2015, pp. 2098-2100).

3 These two perspectives are respectively agued in (Riley, 1996) and (Berkowitz, 2005).

Enlightened reformer of the present for his early Enlightenment advocates. Confucius has been characterized as both a traditionalist and an innovator: a scholar who projects an innovative ethical model into the past to morally educate and reform the crisis-ridden present or who looks at the past in order to reform and renew the present. One paradox of interpreting Leibniz's and the early Enlightenment's reception of Confucian political thought is the problem of Enlightened absolutism. Leibniz was a persistent opponent of political absolutism, including Enlightened absolutism, in his writings concerning political philosophy and current European politics. He explicitly and repeatedly advocated the plurality and mediation of powers, defending the Holy Roman empire against its absolutist critics such as — in the German context — Samuel Pufendorf. However, early modern European enthusiasm for Chinese political thought and culture is often considered a correlate not of the mediation of powers promoted by Leibniz but of Enlightened despotism that legitimated the modern centralized absolutist monarchies that Leibniz opposed.

The model of benevolent enlightened kingship rooted in natural theology (in Leibniz's language) and practical philosophy (in Wolff's language) unfolded in the interpretation of China in Leibniz, Wolff, and Voltaire would in the later Enlightenment — in thinkers such as Kant, Herder, and Hegel — bcome a model of the abuses of absolute power and the obedience of the *ancien régime* as much as the "Orient." The Western idea of China as a regime embodying the "Oriental despotism" of "total power" was shaped during the long eighteenth-century by disputes over the appropriate relationship between politics and religion and enlightened kingship and popular self-determination.[4] This problem can be resolved in the case of Leibniz by properly understanding both the plurality of powers and the function of an enlightened ruler.

Against Oriental Despotism: The Political Theology of the Chinese in the *Novissima Sinica*

Leibniz's attention to the Chinese moral and political system as a potentially superior model that can instruct and help reform the way of life and institutions of the West is expressed in his *Novissima Sinica* (*Latest News from China*, 1697). In this early sustained discussion of China, which thematized the distance and complementary of the two extremes of the Eurasian continent, Leibniz stressed how civil precepts and laws, as well as the hedge of customs and the network of obligations in the subsequent passage, are coordinated to achieve the best possible equilibrium of society:

> But who would have believed that there is on earth a people who, though we are in our view so very advanced in every branch of behavior, still surpass us in comprehending the precepts of civil life? Yet now we find this to be so among the Chinese, as we learn to know them better. And so if we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy, that is, in the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and use of mortals. Indeed, it is difficult to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquility and the establishment of social order, so that men shall be disrupted in their relations as little as possible (Leibniz, 1994, p. 45).

How is such a harmonious adaptive equilibrium possible? On the one hand, human relations are left to themselves with less intervention and interference in them than in Europe. On the other hand, this self-ordering is possible because of a deeply-ingrained system of interconnected

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4   An early contrast between European freedom and "Oriental despotism," which some trace back to the Greek conception of the Persians, was made by Johann Georg Meusel in his 1776 work *Der Geschicht-forscher*, Partes 3-4, p. 239.

customs, duties, and feelings of duty and respect that form a functional whole. Leibniz described in the next passage of the *Novissima* how to Europeans, who are "not enough accustomed to act by reason and rule, these [practices] smack of servitude; yet among [the Chinese], where these duties are made natural by use, they are observed gladly" (Leibniz, 1994, p. 46). The Chinese, Leibniz claimed, have achieved a higher social niveau in which obedience and reverence have become the practiced norms of society and negative social affects, such as "hatred, wrath, or excitement," have been tempered and brought under control (Leibniz, 1994, p. 46).

The deployment on words such as obedience in these passages might suggest the idea of a despotitic subordination of inferiors to superiors, of the weak to the the powerful, the young to the old, and females to males. Herder would near the end of the eighteenth-century in his *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784), contrasting European freedoms with Oriental oppression, interpret such facets of Chinese social life as an unnatural and static order of unreflective childlike obedience to despotic power (Herder, 1985, p. 436-437). It is noteworthy, however, that Leibniz has an alternative conception that does not rely, as Herder and Hegel would, on the opposition of the natural and the artifical and the pre-reflective customary and merely reflexive with the self-consciously reflective. He is not describing the imposition of an artificial external Leviathan-like power onto the powerless undifferentiated equal masses in which only one, namely, the Emperor, is free as Hegel would assert in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Hegel, 2011, pp. 87; 226-232). In this construction of an image of total power, "everything derives solely from the emperor" (Hegel, 2011, p. 230). The interpretations of Herder and Hegel would play an essential part in the evolution of the Oriental despotism thesis that has dominated modern Western thinking about China and became a Western influence on modern Chinese anti-democratic thinking.

Leibniz focuses on the customary and rational self-regulating character of — a no doubt idealized portrayal — Chinese society. The *Novissima* suggests the moral self-organization and, what could be well described as, the autonomy that characterizes a proper equilibrium and harmony in which the parts coordinate through internal (e.g., customs, habits, and dispositions) as well as external (e.g., laws) reasons and mechanisms. The coordination of Chinese society is a practical exemplar of the harmonious balance and mediation of different powers in Leibniz in contrast with Hegel's portrait of the arbitrary, bureaucratic, and unjust imposition of domination from above (Hegel, 2011, p. 232).

Leibniz's understanding of Chinese society is of a morally and normatively guided self-ordering system in which tranquility and order are achieved through the activities and participation of members of society who have their own social agency and roles. Social participation in roles reaches its high-point in the Emperor who is not above or external to Chinese moral-political life:

> Who indeed does not marvel at the monarch of such an empire? His grandeur almost exceeds human stature, and he is held by some to be a mortal god. His very nod is obeyed. Yet he is educated according to custom in virtue and wisdom and rules his subjects with an extraordinary respect for the laws and with a reverence for the advice of wise men. Endowed with such eminence he seems fit indeed to judge. Nor is it easy to find anything worthier of note than the fact that this greatest of kings, who possesses such complete authority in his own day, anxiously fears posterity and is in greater dread of the judgment of history, than other kings are of representatives of estates and parliaments. Therefore he carefully seeks to avoid actions which might cast a reflection upon his reputation when recorded by the chroniclers of his reign and placed in files and secret archives (Leibniz, 1994, p. 47).[5]

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5   On this passage and Leibniz's particular enthusiasm for the Kangxi (康熙) Emperor (r. 1661–1722), compare

The Chinese emperor has powers akin to an earthly god, and an authority and height that demands his command be obeyed. He can set masses of humans into motion. This description could be used to support the idea of the Oriental despot, who has unlimited arbitrary power over all and duties and responsibilities to none, as seen in Hegel's claim that in the Orient "only one is free" (Hegel, 2011, p. 87). Despite his own emphasis in his practical philosophy on the self-organization of the community in ethical life and the political system of the state, Hegel did not recognize the moral self-organization of the community and the mediation of powers at play in Chinese society. Hegel interprets Chinese life as dominated by external despotic and bureaucratic powers, and Western (in particular, German) social life as the achievement of freedom. Leibniz, however, focuses on the delimited role of the Chinese monarch and how this role shapes and limits political power: his account gives the ruler both power and responsibility for the use of that power in a way that corelates with Confucian moral-political philosophy. In this conception, the ruler ought to be educated in virtue, wisdom, and respect for the laws and act in view of them; that is to say, reign according to the good instead of the arbitrary will. The ruler is evaluated by the internalized standards maintained in Confucian practical philosophy, fears the judgment of the sages and history, and thus appropriately (according to the Confucian notion of *yi* 義) fulfills his role and mandate.

Leibniz asks his readers to construe the ritual reverence for Confucius, the monarch, and the ancestors to be primarily political rather than religious (Leibniz, 1994, p. 59). Leibniz's description of the Chinese political system accords with his own political philosophy and, as we will see later, his political theology that can identify the Chinese with natural theology while distinguishing between civil-political and religious cults. These two claims distance the essence — if not the present reality — of Chinese political theology from charges of paganism as well as irreligious atheism, materialism, and Spinozism.[6]

The Chinese monarch has more power, no doubt, than the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire; both, however, are given roles and responsibilities. These are limited by the customary and rationally justified sense and scope of that role. The Chinese ruler is accordingly not the pure despot of the Oriental despotism thesis. This thesis gained prominence over the later Enlightenment period as European attitudes toward China became increasingly more negative. We know what despotic power looked like for Leibniz. He portrayed Louis XIV of France as despotic in his polemical political writings and rejected political absolutism in his critiques of Pufendorf and Hobbes. But the Chinese ruler was not a tyrant like the French sun-king in Leibniz's Chinese writings. There were elements, such as the description of authority and command, which could be employed in line with the Oriental despotism thesis. The title of this section is anachronistic. The Western conception of Oriental despotism developed into its full modern form that encompassed West, South, and East Asia in distinction from Europe only after Leibniz. Leibniz had, however, already offered a different and more insightful and nuanced interpretation of the roles of authority and responsibility in Chinese practical life.

(Perkins, 2004, p. 128).

6   Leibniz repeatedly rejected the atheistic and materialist interpretations of Chinese thought, at least in its ancient and essential form, maintaining in his correspondence with Des Bosses that these interpretations: "were so far from succeeding in this that, instead, all the contrary propositions seem to me most probable. In fact, the ancient Chinese more than the philosophers of Greece seem to have come near to the truth, and they seem to have taught that matter itself is the production of God." Leibniz to Des Bosses, 13 January 1716; (Leibniz, 2007, p. 359).

Leibniz as a Political Thinker

To understand the connections between Leibniz's political philosophy and his interpretation of the practical philosophy of the Chinese, we need to contextualize his political philosophy and its relationship with his understanding of China.

Leibniz's political philosophy has been underappreciated in the reception of his thought. The young Leibniz studied law and then spent his adult life in the diplomatic and political service of nobility and royalty, particularly the House of Hanover that assumed the British crown a few years before his death. He is most familiar for his writings on metaphysics, mathematics, and logic to such an extent that there are Leibniz scholars who maintain that "there is no explicit political philosophy in Leibniz."[7] Leibniz's wide-ranging political correspondence and writings concerned the foundations of law, local and international political affairs and social problems, and moral and political philosophy.

The youthful Leibniz's practical interests and reformist inclinations led him to decline an academic career in the university and into the service of the archbishop and elector of Mainz (Antognazza, 2009, p. 79). From his service in Mainz to Hanover, Leibniz was an advocate of legal reforms, the reconciliation of conflicting Catholic and Protestant parties within the empire and Europe, and the practical defense and theoretical justification of the Holy Roman Empire with its loose federation of non-identical diverse overlapping and intersecting powers (Riley, 1976). This division included intellectually informed advisors, like himself, who might be compared with the administratively active Confucian literati. This plurality of distinct overlapping spheres and centers of powers was condemned as "irregular" and "monstrous" (monstro simile) by Pufendorf and justified by Leibniz as a check on absolute power. In a series of polemical (sometimes witty) writings, Leibniz challenged the internal centralization and the external expansionism of the absolutist French monarch, who he called the "Most Christian War-God," Louis XIV (Leibniz, 1988, pp. 121-145).

Leibniz criticized the vision of absolute unified sovereignty maintained by Hobbes and Pufendorf in his more theoretically oriented political writings. Leibniz had ambivalent views throughout his career of early modern thinkers of sovereign power such as Hobbes and Pufendorf. Leibniz recognized the strengths of Hobbes' rationalizing method even as he critiqued it for reviving Thrasymachus's position in Plato's *Republic* that justice is the interest of the stronger power and upholding a political-theological voluntarism that reduced the justice and goodness of God to an arbitrary political despotism that is unworthy of the divine.

Recent interpreters have accentuated either: (1) Leibniz's backward looking traditionalism in striving for a morally oriented and religiously informed legal and political philosophy (Riley, 1996) or (2) his progressive modernism in applying the paradigm of the new mathematical sciences to law and politics so that, despite his own intentions, he becomes a primary source for the reduction of legal thinking to the positivistic scientific model of legal scientism and positivism (Berkowitz, 2005). Both of these readings capture signiifcant dimensions of his thought; but they are inadequate to the extent that Leibniz is neither a pure traditional natural law theorist nor modernizing positivist. Leibniz's efforts — beginning with his early juridical works — endeavor to preserve by reforming traditional conceptions of ethics, law, and politics through their modernistic rationalization. Leibniz's practical philosophy encompasses and remains beholden to Pauline Christian, Roman legal, Reformation Aristotelian, and classical Platonic sources, amongst others. It is this configuration of the ancient and the modern that shapes Leibniz's encounter with Chinese thought and culture.

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7   Philip Wiener in his introduction to (Leibniz, 1951, p. xlviii).

Ethical Ideals and Political Realities

Leibniz's conception of reason, which he claims is embodied in Enlightened political systems such as Chinese society (Leibniz, 1994, p. 45), implies that normative reasoning about ends guides instrumental rational calculations about means. There is less of a bifurcation between the ethical-normative and the prudential-instrumental in Leibniz's practical philosophy than found in Kant's moral thinking.[8] This emphasis on continuity between degrees of variation is evident beginning with Leibniz's early legal writings that analyze how positive civil law stems from natural law thatoffers both grounds of justification and norms that guide social-political reform and renewal. The language of roman legal thinking and Pauline Christian charity cannot merely serve as a conservative rhetoric for Leibniz; they were sources of his project of enlightened reform and social policy through the use and extension of reason.

Leibniz applied his practical conception of reason, with all the presuppositions that this has for him, to the implicit rationality at work in Chinese practical philosophy in the "Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese" (1715-1716). Leibniz described Chinese conceptions in light of the Western categories of reason and a natural theology that unites the religious and the political:

> What we call the light of reason in man, they call commandment and law of Heaven. What we call the inner satisfaction of obeying justice and our fear of acting contrary to it, all this is called by the Chinese (and by us as well) inspirations sent by the Xangti [Shangdi 上帝] (that is, by the true God). To offend Heaven is to act against reason, to ask pardon of Heaven is to reform oneself and to make a sincere return in word and deed in the submission one owes to this very law of reason. For me I find all this quite excellent and quite in accord with *natural theology*. Far from finding any distorted understanding here, I believe that it is only by strained interpretations and by interpolations that one could find anything to criticize on this point. It is pure Christianity, insofar as it renews the natural law inscribed in our hearts—except for what revelation and grace add to it to improve our nature (Leibniz, 1994, p. 104).

The practical and political achievements of the Chinese, which Leibniz suggests can be an example and model to reform the practical and political life of the Occident, is interconnected with the purity of the insights of Chinese natural theology that only is in need of Christian revelation to perfect itself. In this sense, we can describe Leibniz's interpretation as "political-theological" It depends on a rationalized and moralized account of Christianity and the relation between religion and politics.

The interdependence of the religious and political spheres is not accidental nor merely an instrumental concern for Leibniz in his political and Chinese writings. Politics is thought in relationship to political theology and pragmatic political concerns in these texts. Based on his pragmatic understanding of political affairs, Leibniz recommended that we "imagine things at their worst in politics" while "imagining things at their best in morality" (Leibniz 1988: 81). Leibniz applies this maxim and pragmatic concern in his list of areas where Europe surpasses China. Passivism — which he associates with the overly "Christian" attitude of the Chinese in this passage — allows evil to flourish and the good to be undone:

> [The Chinese] also yield to us in military science, not so much out of ignorance as by deliberation. For they despise everything which creates or nourishes ferocity in men, and

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8   On the prudential and instrumental in Kant's practical philosophy, see Nelson (2004, pp. 305-319).

almost in emulation of the higher teachings of Christ (and not, as some wrongly suggest, because of anxiety), they are averse to war. They would be wise indeed if they were alone in the world. But as things are, it comes back to this, that even the good must cultivate the arts of war, so that the evil may not gain power over everything (Leibniz, 1994, p. 45).

The Chinese have to this extent failed in Leibniz's estimation to properly mediate the higher religious and lower prudential teachings necessary for maintaining social-political life. Granted that Leibniz might appear to be committed to thinking of the political through the dualistic extremes of a pragmatic and calculative self-interested realism and an idealistic image of altruistic charity for others inspired by Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, he emphasized their mutuality and the moral direction of political action in his writings and correspondence. Leibniz articulated the possibility of reconciling the ethical and the prudential in an ethically oriented politics in his portrayals of justice as the charity of the wise (*caritas sapientis*), as a philosophically enlightened love (*agapê*), and as a universal benevolence informed by prudence so that mere power and evil will not win.[9] This mediation of morality and knowledge is the basis for his applied utilitarian "science of felicity" (*scientia felicitates*) that ought to orient and guide enlightened morally oriented pragmatic policies. The Chinese political system guided by Confucian literati provides an example of a philosophically oriented politics.

Leibniz was an advocate of limited monarchy, arguing for the diversity of powers as a way to restrict the abuse of authority. This political stance appears to be in conflict with the image of the Enlightened despot. Accordingly, as we saw above, Leibniz deploys his own political sensibility to define and limit the potentially excessive power of the Chinese monarch. One essential limit is the perspective and judgment of the Confucian literati intellectuals who mediate the Emperor's power through the administration of scholar-bureaucrats and who form a sort of critical public that can philosophically and pragmatically guide the polity. . Notions of publicity and accountability are constitutive of Leibniz's interpretation of political authority, and these elements are not lacking in his account of the responsibility and scope of the Chinese monarch and its Confucian literati "philosophical" administrators.

Leibniz's Platonic Confucianism

Leibniz maintained the priority of the wise in governing (the philosophical monarch) and the role of divine providence in human affairs, both of which have in his interpretation Chinese political-theological correlates: the sage-king (*shengren* 聖人) and "will of heaven" (tianzhi 天志).[10] From his Platonizing perspective, Leibniz rejected John Locke's social contract theory, including the principle of equal natural rights, and appealed to providence in order to justify obedience to de facto regimes in his critique of William Sherlock's *Case of Allegiance* (Leibniz, 1988). Leibniz's position has its Chinese correlates in the Confucian interpretation and hierarchical ranking of social and familial roles and "heaven's will" as expressing the moral and natural order of the world. Leibniz's interpretation of the idea of a Confucian sage-ruler is informed by his prudentially mediated Platonic-Pauline conception of benevolent political wisdom as much as by actual Chinese moral and political sources.

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9   Leibniz appeals to Paul on love while reintegrating it with knowledge in contrast with Paul's skeptical remark that: "Knowledge puffs up; love builds up" (*Gnôsis phusioi, agapê oikodomei*). *1 Corinthians*, 8:1.

10 I would like to thank Axel Rüdiger for pointing out the importance of the Utopian elements in Leibniz's interpretation of China and earlier European thinkers who noted affinities between the Confucian sage ruler and the Platonic philosopher-king, including Michel de Montaigne, Georg Hornius, and Isaac Vossius.

In contrast to Kant's radical differentiation of pure practical reason (ethics) and pragmatic prudence (Nelson, 2004), Leibniz upheld the eudaemonist dimension of the political that aims at general well-being. He articulated the bonds between one's own self-interested happiness and the happiness of others, as ends for their own sake, in addition to the general good and common welfare of society, humanity, and God's creation. This line of argumentation led him to assert the continuity between human justice and divine justice (theodicy), agreeing with Plato in the *Meno* that the divine — rationally and spontaneously — follows the good rather than the good being posited through the will (Leibniz, 1988, p. 45).

Leibniz rejected both legal positivism, which conflates actual force and positive laws with justice, as well as voluntarism, which prioritizes the capricious arbitrary will and coercive power of worldly kings and God. Legal positivism and practical voluntarism reduce the political to the relativism of 'might makes right'; and they undermine possibilities of criticism and complaint that are the prerequisites of enlightened reform (Leibniz, 1988, pp. 47-48). Belief in the primacy of the will and coercive power independent of reasons necessarily undermines goodness and justice (Leibniz, 1985, p. 59). Leibniz concluded in a Platonic vein that even God's will — and the Chinese idea of the will of heaven — must follows the good that is the object of divine understanding and, furthermore, that there is a "common conception of justice" (i.e., the good) that orients both humans and God (Leibniz, 1985, p. 94; 1988, pp. 45-64). God and heaven are not irrational powers; they key aspects of the rational order of nature and of rationa knowledge of that order.[11]

In the Chinese context, the common principle of justice extends between heaven, humans, and earth. The Platonic priority of the good is visible for Leibniz in the Neo-Confucian account of patterning principle or *li* 理. *Li* was one of the candidates for a Chinese correlate to the Christian idea of God. Leibniz glosses *li* as "spirit." Leibniz's reading is Platonic, as he takes the patterning principle (*li*) to be the good. He takes the principle of *li* to assert the priority and unity (theoretical and practical) of reason. This approach was mediated by the early Jesuit reception of Neo-Confucianism that was itself shaped by its more rationalist form associated with Zhu Xi 朱熹.

Leibniz adopts an eclectic Platonic strategy in his discussion of *li* in "Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion" (1708), noting how: "From the *li*, taken in itself, emanates justice, wisdom and the other virtues…" (Leibniz, 1994, p. 67). Whereas the normative world originates in *li* in itself, the material world stems from modified *li* linked and intermixed with *qi* 氣. *Li* in and of itself, defined as harmony and justice, is essentially rational and normative. *Li* is imperfectly realized and expressed in the rational order of the natural world. In the Neo-Confucian framework, and ultimately in the end for Leibniz who emphasizes gradations of continuity in contrast to Kant's strategy of conceptual separation, the categories of the normative and the political cannot be separated from the categories of the cosmological and the theological.

According to Leibniz, the universe challenges us with questions of its harmony and justice. These questions echo and have their correlates in Chinese traditions as well. Leibniz's nominal definition of justice is: "a constant will to act in such a way that no one has reason to complain" (Leibniz, 1988, p. 53). This point is clarified in his account of the degrees of justice that ascend from the legal to the ethical and then to the religious, which emerged in his earlier interpretations of the Roman legal tradition and Pauline charity (Schneider, 1967). Leibniz differentiated three practical spheres: (1) the *legal* is the minimal negative duty to harm no one (the "strict right" of commutative justice based in self-interest); (2) the *ethical* is the positive duty to "give each his due"

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11 The most careful and comprehensive account of the rational order of nature in Leibniz is (Rutherford, 1998).

and act with charity for the sake of others (the equity or distributive justice oriented by concern for others and general welfare); and (3) the *religious* is to live honestly or piously for its own sake (the universal justice and divine republic of God and humans) (Leibniz, 1988, pp. 171-172).

Leibniz's conception of justice is best indicated in — 'pure' or philosophically interpreted — Christianity. Yet Leibniz finds its inspiration at work in Chinese moral and political practices and ideas, which as natural (political) theology express a form of "pure Christianity" (Leibniz, 1994, p. 104) or the 'charity of the wise.' Confucian benevolence (*ren* 仁) is an expression of the compassion of the philosopher habitualized and institutionalized in social-political life.

Conclusion

Leibniz often appears to rediscover, as in a reflection, his own conception of ethics and politics in his response to Chinese practical philosophy. He no doubt at times dreamed of converting the Chinese to his own philosophical vision of pure natural theology rather than impure Christianity. It remains an open question to what extent Leibniz's encounter with China modified his thinking though it cannot be said to have radically altered it.

Leibniz's ethical principle of charity was adopted into an interpretive strategy of normatively oriented charity that is noticeable in the way he wishes his readers to interpret Chinese sources.[12] He points towards ways of uncovering the rationality in Chinese discourse despite its distance and foreignness to Europeans. Leibniz's attempt to articulate the intrinsic meaningfulness and rationality of other perspectives in his approach to China remains fairly remarkable in the primarily Eurocentric history of modern Western philosophy. It continues to be suggestive for contemporary intercultural thinking even if he offers an insufficient hermeneutical model for it.

Leibniz's theoretical and practical, ideal and pragmatic, political thinking are not discontinuous; they converged in his humanistic and cosmopolitan vision that is reflected in his diverse practical and theoretical efforts at peace and reconciliation between distinct and conflicting forms of life and philosophical perspectives. A number of his writings in practical philosophy and his diplomatic and intellectual correspondence concerned tolerance, compromise, and coming to an agreement across political, religious, scientific, and cultural disputes and distances from the Holy Roman Empire and Europe to Peter the Great's Russia and the far East.[13] Leibniz's writings concerning China exemplify, as this chapter has illustrated, these broader concerns.

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12 I develop this account of the hermeneutical character of Leibniz's interpretation of China further in (Nelson, 2009, pp. 277-300).

13 See (Nelson, 2009; 2011).

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