

Leibniz and China: Religion, Hermeneutics, and Enlightenment

Eric Sean Nelson

Introduction

To learn and then have occasion to practice what you have learned—is this not satisfying? To have friends arrive from afar—is this not a joy? To be patient even when others do not understand—is this not the mark of the gentleman?”¹

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is not typically seen as having formulated a “hermeneutics,” or as being a “hermeneutical thinker,” despite his discussions of the art of interpretation and his

I appreciate the helpful remarks of the editor and the reviewer. This article substantially develops my earlier argument in “Leibniz, China, and the Hermeneutics of Cross-cultural Understanding,” *Einheit in der Vielheit: Akten des VIII. Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses*, 2, ed. H. Breger, J. Herbst, and S. Erdner (Hannover: Leibniz Gesellschaft, 2006), 700–6. The following abbreviations are used: (BJC) refers to G. W. Leibniz, *Der Briefwechsel mit den Jesuiten in China (1689–1714)*, ed. R. Widmaier (Hamburg: Meiner, 2006). (WC) refers to G. W. Leibniz, *Writings on China*, ed. and trans. D. J. Cook and H. Rosemont, Jr. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), including the preface to the *Novissima Sinica* (NS), “On the Civil Cult of Confucius” (CCC), “Remarks on Chinese Rites and Religion” (CRR), and “Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese” (NTC).

1. *Confucius: Analects*, trans. E. Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 1:1.

influence on the development of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hermeneutics in Germany. Nonetheless, many of his works involve issues of how best to interpret texts and other persons. His voluminous writings thus contain—at least implicitly—a hermeneutics, or art of understanding signs, through his practice of interpretation. Furthermore, hermeneutical concerns are prevalent in a number of Leibniz's international projects. Through various philosophical and practical endeavors, Leibniz attempted to reconcile conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable arguments and positions within Western philosophy (ancient and modern, Aristotelian and Cartesian, organic-teleological and mathematical-mechanical) and Christianity (Protestant and Catholic, Western and Orthodox), as well as between western Europe and the cultures of Russia, Islam, and China.² This project of reconciliation proceeded through the critical employment of reason and is oriented by one of Leibniz's earlier insights into natural law: in cases of conflict, justice calls for maximizing harmony, and harmony is the greatest amount of multiplicity compatible with unity.³

Given Leibniz's importance in the early European reception of Chinese culture, and as one of the few early modern figures to argue for its value and at times its superiority,⁴ this paper examines the reality of and possibilities for a hermeneutics of intercultural understanding in the context of early modern rationalism and the early Enlightenment. At first glance, this task does not seem very promising, as representatives of the new scientific spirit and mechanical philosophy, such as Robert Boyle, used the Chinese as a primary example of the vices of teleologi-

2. In the preface to the *Theodicy*, Leibniz mentions that Islam does not diverge from the truths of natural theology, although only Christianity perfects them. Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil* (Open Court, 1988), 51. Leibniz's interest in reconciliation does not imply a tolerance that precludes criticism. However, this does not imply an indifference towards religion and its content, as M. R. Antognazza rightly points out in "Leibniz and Religious Toleration," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 622. Yet there is also a basic identity between revealed and natural theology such that he can call the Chinese thinking of heaven as "pure Christianity" (NTC, §31/ WC 105).

3. Leibniz, *Frühe Schriften zum Naturrecht* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2003), 374–75, 296–97.

4. For example, BJC 7, 29, 37, 145, 441. The most accurate, extensive, and philosophically sophisticated portrayal of Leibniz and China is Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

cal thinking.⁵ Whereas Boyle associated China with the medieval past, a variety of philosophers from Arnauld and Bayle to Malebranche argued against Chinese wisdom for its apparent irreligion and materialism. For them, it was an inferior—since not yet rational—form of Spinozism.⁶ Consequently, these philosophers sided with the Dominicans against the Jesuits' advocacy of "conversion by accommodation" in the Chinese Rites Controversy, favoring instead the conversion of the Chinese to a Christian European culture.⁷

Nicolas Malebranche in particular involved himself in the dispute over whether the Chinese should retain their traditional practices in Christianized form or whether their rites should be eliminated. He claimed that he was not criticizing the Jesuit missionaries in his "Advice to the Reader" in his polemical *Entretien d'un philosophe chretien et d'un philosophe chinois* (1708), which defended the endeavor of exposing and refuting the Chinese by using "concepts they might accept" in order to better enable their conversion.⁸ Despite his claim to the contrary, it is clear that it was taken by its readers to be critical of Jesuit attitudes toward China and, given the implications of his anti-accommodationist arguments, rightfully so.

Malebranche's guiding hermeneutical maxim is one of doubt and suspicion against the Chinese, justified by Christian piety, reducing by analogy and apparent conflation the less familiar impieties of the Chinese to the more familiar materialistic atheism—as Malebranche interpreted it—of Spinoza. According to Malebranche, "It seems to me there are many correspondences between the impieties of Spinoza and those of the Chinese Philosopher. The change in name would not

5. Robert Boyle, *A Free Enquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, ed. E. Davis and M. Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 102–3, 150.

6. Y.-T. Lai, "The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23 (April 1985): 151–78.

7. For a historical overview, see G. Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 15–76.

8. N. Malebranche, *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher on the Existence and Nature of God*, trans. D. A. Iorio (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), 45 and 63. Further compare: D. E. Mungello, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41 (1980): 551–78; Franklin Perkins, *Commerce of Light*, 166.

change anything in what is essential to my writing.”⁹ The Chinese are monistic materialists without any conception of the true God, and thus to rationally understand what they say is already to reject it as irrational.¹⁰ Leibniz, as we will see, would counter this universal distrust with the principle of charity (i.e., maximizing the rational coherence and meaningfulness of the utterances of others) in his own writings on China, not of course in opposition to but based on principles he argued were basic to Christianity itself, since such hermeneutical suspicion and hostility were incompatible with genuine Christian charity and justice, and would reduce even the Bible to absurdity and heterodoxy.¹¹

Despite the initially hostile reaction, China would become a significant land—both real and imaginary—for the thinkers of the Enlightenment. Both Leibniz and Christian Wolff promoted this transformation of attitudes insofar as they advanced the Jesuit view of the rationalism inherent in “Chinese”—actually Neo-Confucian¹²—thought and culture. Both thinkers transcended the Jesuit approach by arguing for the intrinsic validity and merit of Chinese natural theology (Leibniz) or natural morality (Wolff), and for moral-political philosophy independent of questions of conversion to Christianity.¹³ In China, Leibniz and Wolff saw fragments of a cosmology in which the universe is rationally organized according to *li* 理 (principle) and *qi* 氣 (vital energy), and glimpses of the enlightened philosopher-king who governs with wisdom and virtue for the sake of the common good. Jesuit accounts of Confucius (Kongfuzi 孔夫子, circa 551–479 BCE) and the “Confucian” (*rujia* 儒家, i.e., the school of the scholars or erudites), principles of *ren* 仁 (be-

9. Malebranche, *Nature of God*, 47–48.

10. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

11. NTC §63 / WC 128.

12. Leibniz, like his sources and opponents, conflated the dominant Neo-Confucian philosophy with that of the ancient Chinese. Malebranche and Leibniz devote much attention to *li* 理 (pattern, principle or reason), which was a Neo-Confucian term developed during the Song Dynasty. Whereas Leibniz interpreted *li* as part of the rational and divine ordering of the universe, Malebranche understood it to be a material principle of the immanent organization of nature equivalent to Spinoza’s “God.” Malebranche, 1980, 47 and 69.

13. BJC 145; Compare Voltaire’s admiration for Chinese wisdom and Wolff’s interpretation in “On China” in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. T. Besterman (London: Penguin, 2004), 112–15.

nevolence or humanity) and *shu* 恕 (reciprocity or mutuality), provided evidence for Jesuits that the Chinese knew of the “charity of the wise” that seeks true felicity, which is the supreme principle of morality.¹⁴ Leibniz extends this principle to an ethics of interpretation.

There are multiple examples in Leibniz’s writings in which he calls on his reader(s) to refrain from drawing dangerous conclusions from arguments, such as those of Descartes, out of charity (*caritas* or *charité*).¹⁵ Leibniz’s engagement with China is informed by his use of the principles of “charity,” which discovers or reconstructs the internal rationality and truth of the other’s first-person self-interpretations, and “understanding better,” which locates the truth of the other’s position in an external source or standard. Whereas charity calls for interpreting others as aiming at uttering what is most reasonable or genuinely expressive of their own condition, “understanding better” interprets them as not uttering what is most reasonable or genuinely expressive of their own condition. Whereas the first reaches out to what is different—albeit in the case of Leibniz, in order to promote harmony on the basis of its own agenda rather than for the sake of “alterity” or difference in and of itself—the latter requires, at its most extreme in what Schleiermacher described as the “*Wut des Verstehens*” (fury of understanding), the refutation and sublimation of difference. At the two extremes of interpretation, Chinese rites are either recognized by the interpreter as having their own internal validity, potentially incommensurable with their own standards, or these rites are considered intrinsically false and immoral. In contrast, Leibniz emphasized maximizing multiplicity and harmony, charity and rational judgment in his approach to China, and accordingly employed a “double hermeneutic” in which these two principles moderate each other.

Leibniz defines justice as the “charity of the wise,” and uses this principle not only in his practical philosophy, but also to interpret the statements of others in such a way as to maximize their meaning and to

14. On the charity of the wise, see Patrick Riley, “Leibniz’s *Méditation sur la notion commune de la justice* (1703–2003),” *The Leibniz Review* 13 (Dec. 2003): 67–81; and, on its Pauline and Augustinian basis, “Leibniz on Justice as the Charity of the Wise,” *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik* 8 (2000): 143–58.

15. BJC 130.

minimize undue suspicion. Significantly, in contrast with more epistemological and ontological accounts of hermeneutics, Leibniz's charity not only entails maximizing the rationality of the utterances of others, but also ethical care (*caritas*) for the other. Appealing to the example of St. Paul, Leibniz uses the principle of charity to critically interpret Chinese beliefs (or their "true core") as consistent with natural theology and "true Christianity." He rejected the suspicion of authors such as Malebranche, who interpreted the Chinese as immoral, irrational, and irreligious. The second principle of "understanding better" is based on the early church fathers' reinterpretation of Hebrew and Greek texts as implicitly containing Christian truths that reveal the "true meaning" of the texts. The maxim of "understanding authors better than they understood themselves" seems to coincide with the principle of charity. Yet, even though understanding can be said to preserve truth and to maximize agreement and harmony, primary aspirations for Leibniz, it threatens to transform charity toward others into assimilation of alterity to the sameness of the self.

This paper examines questions of interpretation in Leibniz and Wolff's approach to China in the context of its significance for the development of hermeneutics in eighteenth-century Germany, and its import for addressing issues of cross-cultural interpretation.

The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

It is contestable whether Leibniz or Malebranche offered the more accurate account of neo-Confucian thought, given the confusions and conflation already involved in their sources and heightened by their own interests and agendas. Robert Louden has justifiably argued that Leibniz and Wolff served philosophical, political, and religious purposes that had more to do with their own concerns than with those of the Chinese.¹⁶ Even if such hermeneutical suspicions are valid, which they undoubtedly are, it can be argued that the approach pioneered by

16. R. Louden, "What Does Heaven Say? Christian Wolff and Western Interpretations of Confucian Ethics," in *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. B. W. Van Norden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73–93.

Leibniz and continued by Wolff opened up possibilities for reflection on and dialogue with Chinese thought in ways that other existing perspectives precluded.

More troublesome are the strategies of explanation—unfolded since Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—described by Paul Ricoeur as an exercise in interpretive distrust. The “hermeneutics of suspicion” deciphers impersonal third-person truths from self-deceptive first-person expressions and self-interpretations.¹⁷ The point of this strategy of distrust is that forms of rationality—and consequently of understanding and interpretation—are tied to and implicated in domination, such that encountering and engaging the other is inevitably an exercise in power.

Jon Elster has contended that Leibniz’s model of rationality is intertwined with the formation of early modern capitalism, and that his internationalism reflects the growing mobility of capital and the search for new domains and resources.¹⁸ According to this logic, Leibniz’s efforts for the cosmopolitan exchange of knowledge and goods similarly echo the development of European colonialism. Be that as it may, the suspicion that a given form of rationality is domination needs to be shown through research rather than through assumptions. Reducing history to the history of the West, even if to criticize it for its occlusion of the other, omits the facticity and alterity of other cultures and social realities, which are never entirely Western constructs to the extent that they are already at work and are affecting how they are interpreted. The encounter between Europe and China is not merely an imposition of Western categories onto Eastern material.¹⁹ At some level, there needs to be an acknowledgment of a moment of genuine difference or alterity if critique is to avoid being the reproduction of the Eurocentrism that it is criticizing. If alterity or otherness—including the self-interpretations of others—is ethically and hermeneutically important, as recent philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas have insisted, then suspicion should

17. P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 32–36.

18. J. Elster, *Leibniz et la formation de l’esprit capitaliste* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1975).

19. On the Jesuit and subsequent Western construction of Confucianism, see L. M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions and Universal Civilization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

be directed at ourselves as interpreters and not exclusively toward the other person being interpreted.²⁰

Leibniz and Wolff's efforts to engage Chinese thought cannot be a one-way street to colonizing the other to the extent that their cross-cultural interpretive strategies opened their own and "European" thinking to ideas and practices from another world, justified criticism and suggestions to reform European practices and institutions, and influenced the subsequent development of European philosophy.²¹ Although David Mungello justifiably describes Leibniz's position as "Eurocentric cosmopolitanism,"²² this paper will differentiate as far as possible from our own current "hermeneutical situation," what is merely Eurocentric and what might be genuinely cosmopolitan and dialogical in Leibniz's writings concerning China, by examining the scope, limits, and potential violence of the interpretive practice of maximizing meaningfulness and rationality through the maxims of (1) charity and (2) "understanding better" than the authors themselves.

Rationality and Interpretation: A Preliminary Argument

Who are the Chinese, according to Leibniz? In the preface to the *Novissima Sinica* (1697/1699), a collection of materials about China, Leibniz remarks that the Chinese should be addressed as an ancient and cultivated people who are equal to or who surpass Europe in a number of ways.²³ This remark is not accidental, as Leibniz devoted much attention to encouraging the intellectual, moral, and scientific exchange between China and Europe. Such an exchange partly motivated his correspon-

20. For further discussion, see my forthcoming article, "Levinas and Early Confucian Ethics: Religion, Ritual, and the Sources of Morality," *Levinas Studies* 4, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009).

21. German philosophy from Leibniz to Heidegger has already been impacted by Chinese and Indian thought. Martin Schönfeld has convincingly shown the influence of Chinese "content" on Leibniz, Wolff, and subsequent German philosophy, including—despite his hostility—Kant, in "From Confucius to Kant: The Question of Information Transfer," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33, no. 1 (Jan 2006): 67–81.

22. Mungello, "Chinese Philosophy," 551.

23. NS §2 / WC 46.

dence with the modernizing Russian czar Peter the Great, as Leibniz hoped communication and exchange would be promoted through the mediation of Russia.²⁴ Leibniz formulated his motivation in terms of a religiously based cosmopolitanism when he wrote to Peter: “For I am not one of those impassioned patriots of one country alone, but I work for the well-being of the whole of mankind, for I consider heaven as my country and cultivated men as my compatriots.”²⁵

Leibniz’s Chinese writings provide us with a “test case” of the relation between rationality and the possibility—via an “enlightened” cosmopolitan and dialogical attitude—of genuine intercultural interpretation and mutual understanding. This paper examines this “test case” in response to the question: Do some practices and varieties of reasoning and interpretation better enable and promote encountering and engaging others or what is different from oneself?

There are three preliminary reasons why the question of rationality might make a difference in the context of Leibniz’s thought, given that Leibniz was initially hostile to Chinese culture. First, despite caricatures of the supposed dogmatism of early modern rationalism, Leibniz’s rationalism is more experimental and hypothesis-driven because of its more formal character. This is illustrated by Leibniz’s insistence throughout the *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* (1716) that the reception of Chinese thought proceed through hypotheses elucidating the meaning of what is said without prematurely jumping to conclusions via suspicions such as those of Malebranche. Although he modified the model of the geometrical method that proceeded from one foundational truth, involving some particular content such as the Cartesian cogito, Leibniz articulated nature and the divine based on the use of reason, which combined metaphysical and mathematical deductive reasoning with the hypothetical-experimental methods of the new sciences.

It was Leibniz’s generalization and formalization of rationality on the basis of the principles of noncontradiction and sufficient reason—

24. See Foucher de Careil, *Oeuvre de Leibniz* (Paris, 1875), 7:506–9; “On the Academy of Arts and Sciences (Letter to Peter the Great, 1716),” in *Leibniz*, ed. P. Wiener (New York, Scribner’s, 1951), 594–99.

25. Leibniz, “Academy of Arts,” 597.

which Wolff interpreted Confucius as applying to moral truths and Leibniz as most fully developing²⁶—that created the conditions for the greater coordination of reason and experimentation. This rational-experimental model is embodied in Leibniz’s interpretive practices. Given the practical concerns that Leibniz addressed with the resources of his model of rationality, reason could not be restrained to its theoretical or speculative function. Rationality is not only an instrument of the growth and exchange of scientific and technical knowledge, but of moral, political, and religious insights that are all necessary for enlightened progress. According to Leibniz, the adoption of such a concept of reason would consequently provide the means for various individuals and groups—of divergent and conflicting belief systems—to come to some sort of agreement and consensus about basic truths.²⁷ In contrast with Locke’s privative or negative justification of tolerance based on human lack of certainty about knowledge, Leibniz contends that we all partake of the truth to various degrees—just as each monad expresses the truth in its own more or less clear and distinct way.²⁸ Consequently, tolerance enables communication and intellectual argument. It does not preclude the achievement of truth, as anti-pluralists fear, but is instead its very condition.

Second, as Robert Adams has argued about Leibniz’s ecumenicalism, Leibniz developed a “principled pragmatism” concerning religiously divisive issues.²⁹ Although Leibniz often argued for strategies of pragmatic accommodation, such as agreement and exchange because of its utility to various parties, these strategies are more deeply justified

26. C. Wolff, *Erste Philosophie oder Ontologie* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2005), §71.

27. This agreement is not the purely formal consensus attributed to Habermas, as it retains moral and religious content that can be interpreted as being in accord with one another through a pragmatically oriented principle of charity. The question whether a purely formal consensus is possible or whether it requires “mutual understanding” about natural theology remains at issue in the contemporary possibility of mutual understanding between the “West” and “Islam.”

28. F. Perkins makes this point contrasting Locke and Leibniz in his account of tolerance in Leibniz, “Virtue, Reason, and Cultural Exchange,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 3 (2002): 446–47.

29. R. Adams, “Leibniz’s Conception of Religion,” in *Proceedings of the 20th World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 7, ed. M. D. Gedney (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2000).

by Leibniz's practical philosophy, which is oriented toward felicity and the common good.³⁰ Accordingly, Leibniz is pragmatic, and, in principle, committed to moral and religious universalism and cosmopolitanism, since all peoples and individuals are inherently capable—at least in principle—of knowing the principles of natural morality and natural theology. On the basis of these natural principles, knowable through reason and the human heart, Leibniz affirmed the possibility of mutual rational understanding and reconciliation emerging between divergent (Calvinist and Lutheran), antagonistic (Protestant and Catholic), separated (Eastern and Western Christianity), and seemingly utterly foreign (Chinese and European) belief systems. However, for Leibniz, this commitment to formal rationality and tolerance cannot mean indifference to all content.³¹ It cannot exclude argument and disagreement, nor even conflict and war. Although aversion to war is the higher moral principle, one that he finds to a greater degree in China than in Christian Europe, Leibniz maintains that “even the good must cultivate the arts of war, so that the evil may not gain power over everything.”³²

Third, it is insufficient to focus only on the content of Leibniz's ethics, that is, individual and common happiness, since these are to be promoted as perfections or virtues through reflection and the use of reason. For Leibniz, perfections are not justified simply as pleasures through hedonism, but rather—in Aristotelian terms—eudemonistically and prudentially as part of a disposition towards justice, which is understood as the coordination of sentiment and reason. Likewise, in an early reading of Confucian morality as an exemplary and experimental rather than a rule-based ethics, Wolff focuses on how Confucian ethics provide concrete models of perfection in “emperors and philosophers” for moral life.³³

30. See especially “Felicity” in *Political Writings*, ed. P. Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 82–84; Leibniz, “La Félicité,” in *Textes inédits d'après les manuscrits de la Bibliothèque provinciale de Hanovre*, ed. Gaston Grua (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948), 2:579–80.

31. See M. R. Antognazza, “Religious Toleration,” 620–22. However, Leibniz's discussion of the Chinese, as we will see, suggests modifying the strength of her conclusion.

32. NS §2 / WC 46.

33. C. Wolff, *Rede über die praktische Philosophie der Chinesen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1985), 46–47, 56–57.

Leibniz argued in his early work on natural law that charity and justice cannot be separated, as charity provides the measure of justice, and universal justice is love of all.³⁴ Justice is the charity of the wise, intelligent goodwill, and universal benevolence.³⁵ Leibniz's notion of practical reason demands charity not only in a limited sense but also charity in all things. This includes charity in understanding and interpretation, since these are also types of action and perfection, and thus also part of ethics. Recognizing the potential validity and merit of Chinese thought—as internally rational in such a way that is externally recognized or reconstructed—is explicitly connected with Leibniz's basic moral principle of justice as the charity of the wise. Unity and multiplicity need not therefore be conflicting values in communicating with and approaching the other.

Enlightenment and Christianity: Leibniz on Charity and Understanding Better

*It is most true . . . that one cannot know God without loving one's brother, that one cannot have wisdom without having charity (which is the real touchstone of virtue), and that one even advances one's own good in working for that of others.*³⁶

34. Leibniz, *Frühe Schriften zum Naturrecht*, 302–3, 240–41.

35. "Pleasure is nothing other than a perception of perfection. Perfection is a magnitude of being, or that through which a being is more than it otherwise would be, so that the science of perfection consists as it were in a metaphysical art of measurement. Yet because pleasure is often mixed with displeasure, so that we perceive both at once and at one time one is increased and at another time it is decreased, so joy results from an excess of pleasure and sorrow from an excess of displeasure. From this can finally be concluded that happiness is a condition of lasting joy and unhappiness a condition of lasting sorrow and, consequently, that all our thoughts are directed toward how we can achieve happiness and thus a lasting surplus of our improvement in the perception of true perfections." Leibniz, "Of the Highest Good," in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1960–61), 7: 111–17.

36. Leibniz, "Felicity," 84.

Leibniz was involved in a massive correspondence about various forms of reconciliation within Europe, especially ecumenicalism and the possibility of reunifying the Christian churches. If Christians could agree on basic principles of reason, he argued, radical divisions about questions such as whether Christ was physically or symbolically present in the bread and wine would fall away as secondary. Although this in itself is an interesting topic about ethically relating to and interpreting the other, when the other is quite close yet seemingly so far away, I want to explore in more detail a different case emerging from the Jesuit attempt to convert the Chinese to Christianity by adopting themselves to Chinese primarily established Neo-Confucian philosophical ideas and social practices.

The debate between the Jesuits (organized around the missionary and translation work of Matteo Ricci³⁷) and their critics (Franciscan and other missionaries, as well as philosophers such as Arnauld, Bayle, and Malebranche) centered on two questions: (1) whether the “Confucian” (*ru* 儒) system, which dominated Chinese life, was to be accepted as a philosophical and civil ethical-political system or rejected as a pagan and idolatrous religiosity or (2) whether aspects of Chinese belief and practice, even religious ones, were acceptable to Christians because they were in accordance with natural theology, if not, in Leibniz’s language, perfected through Christian-revealed theology. If the first interpretation was correct, such that one was not merely publicly honoring but religiously worshipping ancestors in ancestral rites, this would contradict both traditional Christian doctrine and the Jesuit attempt at immanent conversion from “the inside,” and would have to be rejected as intrinsically detrimental to the Christian faith.³⁸

Some authors interpret this dispute as a narrow theological debate without philosophical import, which could not have influenced Leibniz’s

37. Matteo Ricci discussed the relative merits of translating the Christian notion of God via traditional Chinese expressions such as “heaven” (*Tian* 天) and “lord on high,” (*Shangdi* 上帝) or a new expression (“sovereign of heaven”) in his *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主实义 / *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, trans. D. Lancashire and P. H. Kuo-chen (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1985).

38. For a discussion of Leibniz on the reunification of Christendom and the Chinese rites controversy in the context of his philosophy of religion, see R. Adams, “Conception of Religion,” 2000.

philosophy but be only an occasion for its application.³⁹ However, Leibniz's intervention brought philosophical issues to bear, primarily the status of natural theology and morality, and addressed questions of a hermeneutics of the other. In his writings concerning Chinese rituals and natural theology, Leibniz employed two interpretive principles: (1) the maxim of charity that calls for maximizing the immanent or internal rationality of the interpreted as such and in general;⁴⁰ and (2) the maxim of "understanding the author better than he/she understands him/herself" that calls for the maximization of the rationality of the interpreted according to one's own external standards of rationality and truth. These two principles allow understanding Chinese beliefs as compatible with reason.

Leibniz employed in his Chinese texts a "double hermeneutic" accenting the particularity and truth of the Christian faith (as the perfection of revealed theology) while simultaneously reorienting this faith beyond pious condemnation. Instead of suspicion, reason calls for realizing the greatest amount of agreement and harmony with other systems of belief through the identification of the basic truths shared by revealed and natural theology. Based on the content of their practices rather than their general theological beliefs, Leibniz contended that the Chinese could be practicing a kind of Christianity that in many ways was more Christian than what was practiced by the officially Christian Europeans.⁴¹ Since Leibniz is not known for trying to shock his readers, rather the contrary, and the Pietists condemned Wolff for similar sentiments a few decades later,⁴² Leibniz's pronouncements should be taken sincerely. This is possible not because Leibniz was secretly irreligious, as has been argued by one line of Leibniz interpretation since Bertrand

39. M. Fischer, "Leibniz und die Chinesische Philosophie," *Conceptus: Zeitschrift fuer Philosophie* 22 (1988): 3–18.

40. NTC §10–13 / WC 84–86. Also note how interpretation is taken as requiring equity (§10).

41. NTC, §31/ WC 105.

42. On Wolff's Pietist critics, see H.-M. Gerlach, *Christian Wolff: seine Schule und seine Gegner* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001); G. Becker, "Pietism's Confrontation with Enlightenment Rationalism: An Examination of the Relation between Ascetic Protestantism and Science," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30 (June 1991): 139–58; K. Deppermann, "August Hermann Francke," *Orthodoxie und Pietismus* (Stuttgart: W Kohlhammer, 1982), 241–60.

Russell, but because religion is identified with morality and both with the divine organization of the world that is revealed to reason, as well as to faith.

According to Leibniz, the morality and natural theology of the Chinese is good (*bon*) and akin to what is seen in Job and others prior to Moses and the establishment of the law.⁴³ As will be discussed below, Wolff went further than Leibniz by drawing the analogy directly between Confucius and Moses as legislators for a people. Whereas Wolff differentiated religion and ethics more thoroughly, natural theology and natural morality are inseparable in Leibniz's thought, and their identity is both a problem and an orienting point for his defense of Chinese moral life.

Leibniz employed the principle of charity, which is part of justice for him, throughout his writings when he argued, for example, that good sense could be made of even the strangest of doctrines, such as those of the scholastics, occasionalists, and vitalists. These doctrines and writings are not merely false and confused but contain their own immanent rationale that the interpreter attempts to discover. In his Chinese writings, Leibniz justified the employment of the principle of charity by appealing to both philosophical and religious grounds. First, it usefully promotes the understanding and agreement needed to develop the communication and exchange that is beneficial to all parties. Second, not only is it pragmatically justified by prudential self-interest in happiness, it is in accordance with the genuine truth and best practice of Christianity itself. That is to say, at least Christianity according to Leibniz's philosophical reconstruction of it.

Franklin Perkins has shown how controversies over the mysteries and sectarianism had obscured natural theology in Leibniz's estimation, and Albert Ribas has depicted the philosophical context for Leibniz's "defense of Chinese natural religion" in response to the "decadence of natural religion" that played a role in his controversy with Clarke.⁴⁴ In addition, however, Leibniz's argument has a directly Christian ethical

43. BJC 467.

44. Perkins, "Cultural Exchange," 459; Albert Ribas, "Leibniz's Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese and the Leibniz-Clarke Controversy," *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 1 (Jan. 2003): 64–86.

context that should be emphasized. The fundamental truth of Christianity for Leibniz is disclosed in the Pauline perfections of faith, hope, and charity (or love). Leibniz explicitly connected the hermeneutical principle of charity (i.e., how to interpret others) with the ethical practice of charity (i.e., how to regard others) recommended by St. Paul. By widening what should be considered acceptable to Christians and by secularizing practices condemned as belonging to a false religion, Leibniz rejected Arnauld's upbraiding of the Jesuits for their laxity concerning the Chinese. For Leibniz, "Following the example of Paul they ought to be all things to all men, and the honors given to Confucius seem to have nothing of religious adoration in them."⁴⁵ Leibniz repeatedly refers to the example of Paul. He claims that if there are no grave reasons to the contrary, "it is advisable to give it [the civil cult of Confucius] the most favorable meaning—as the Apostle Paul is said to have done in taking the altar erected to the unknown god as having been instituted by the Athenians for rites which they ought to have celebrated."⁴⁶

Leibniz associates Paul's emphasis on charity, as love for the other, with his making the best possible sense of the other. Leibniz's Platonic Pauline charity—as the justice and universal benevolence that is the charity of the wise, *caritas sapientis seu benevolentia universalis*—grounds both his ethics and his hermeneutics. Interpretation inherently involves ethical claims, and ethics is understood partly from the Pauline and Augustinian moral tradition in which love (charity) is greater than even faith and hope. Leibniz differentiated himself from this tradition, however, by stressing how charity is guided by wisdom in order to achieve felicity, the happiness and perfection of the individual and humanity.⁴⁷ This strategy resonates with Confucian benevolence or humanity (*ren*), particularly Mencius's (Mengzi 孟子, circa 380–300 BCE) analysis of benevolence as deriving from natural moral feelings and sentiments, and the potential Chinese sources for the embrace of

45. NS §11 / WC 51.

46. CCC §9 / WC 63, CRR §9 / WC 74; BJC 245, 297.

47. P. Riley, "Leibniz's Political and Moral Philosophy in the 'Novissima Sinica,'" *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 2 (1999): 217–39.

nature as already moral in some figures of the early and later Enlightenment have not yet been adequately considered.

Leibniz's moral and political philosophy, as a universal jurisprudence that includes both God and humanity, corresponds to his project of theodicy and rational theology. Theodicy is the justification of God's justice from the human perspective of the apparent evils of the world, just as natural theology is the divine considered according to the order of nature from the perspective of reason. Nature cannot be thought of simply as a world without God, according to Leibniz, since the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" drives human reason to something other than the world as its source. Natural theology concerns the "kingdom of grace" as the government of a world justly organized for rational minds.

For Leibniz, justice rightly conceived is "the charity of the wise that is universal benevolence." This definition, according to Patrick Riley, fuses Platonic-geometrizing "wisdom," Pauline "charity," and Augustinian "good will" (*bona voluntas*). In his preface to the *Novissima Sinica*, Leibniz argues that wisdom, charity, and goodwill are to be found more truly in Chinese moral-political practices than in those of Europe.⁴⁸ Because of their moral and political practices, which Leibniz interprets as more just, tolerant, and peaceful than those of Europe, the Chinese are already better Christians than Europeans. They would be even more so if they were to become actual Christians.

The principle of charity led Leibniz to affirm the rationality and at times the superiority of Chinese beliefs and practices. This is only one side of Leibniz's hermeneutics, however, given that the maxims of charitable interpretation and "understanding better" restrain each other. Leibniz did not argue for unlimited interpretive charity, as Europeans "must be able to interpret their ancient books better than the erudites themselves," analogously to how the early Christian responded to the books of the ancient Hebrews. Nonetheless, Leibniz constrained this

48. Compare Riley, "Moral Philosophy," 230–33; Yu Liu argues that Leibniz was deeply affected between 1667 and 1700/01 by the Jesuits propaganda about China being a benevolent despotism compatible with both Christian charity and the rule of the philosopher-king in "From Christian Platonism to Organism: The Two Chinas of Leibniz," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Dec. 2001): 439–51.

assimilative maxim, which has seen so much abuse, by proposing that “it will become evident that the Chinese themselves understand better than was thought, or at least that their public doctrines demand no more than what we are able to concede.”⁴⁹ Charity then takes relative precedence over the maxim of understanding others better than they understand themselves, which Schleiermacher and Dilthey identified with understanding (*verstehen*) the unconscious and the unthought of an author and Heidegger with an exposure to “a content in which we ourselves can grow.”⁵⁰

The priority of charity over “understanding better” can be seen, for instance, when Leibniz contends further that just as Europeans should establish missions in the areas in which they are superior, so too should the Chinese establish missions in Europe in the areas of life that they have perfected, such as in the moral and political realm.⁵¹ Leibniz’s goal of a universal exchange involving mutuality and reciprocity based on reason and justice seems incompatible with a colonial relation. Further, this mutuality is based on the idea of natural morality and theology being shared by both peoples—at least to some degree, which is sufficient to justify charitable rather than mistrustful interpretation. Even if, for Leibniz, the Chinese should become true Christians not only in the natural but in the revealed sense, this should occur by means of the dialogue, accommodation, and assimilation that Leibniz—doubtless ahistorically—perceived in St. Paul and “the Church Fathers who interpreted Plato and the other philosophers in a Christian fashion.”⁵²

The maxim of understanding the author better than the author understood him/herself (or the tradition understood itself) entailed that Christians needed to interpret the Chinese classics better than the Chinese themselves in order to convert them, just as Christians believed they had previously interpreted Greek philosophy better than the Greeks did, and the Hebrew Bible better than the Hebrews, through

49. CCC §11 and 13 / WC 64.

50. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. R. Makkreel and F. Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 147; Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Emad and K. Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4–5.

51. NS §10 / WC 51; BJC 521–23.

52. CCC §9 and NTC §63 / WC 63, 128; BJC 253–55, 577.

their superior and more complete revelation.⁵³ Leibniz modified but did not abandon the assimilative tone of this maxim by making it a principle of dialogue and rational rather than coercive conversion, yet we also find here the potential limits of Leibnizian intercultural communication. Given Leibniz's argument, it should also be the case that dialogue could produce the "conversion" of European to Chinese forms of life if their principles could (1) better create wisdom and happiness for Europeans and (2) if they understand European tradition better than the Europeans themselves in order to further their improvement.

If "understanding better" is to be more than an opportunistic stratagem, as in Leibniz's letters with the Jesuits discussing indirect methods of conversion, it is mutual, reversible, and open to the best possible rational interpretation. Likewise, if ethics is dialogical and cosmopolitan, even if this is derived from European sources, its outcome cannot be controlled except insofar as it is in accord with the dangerous game of producing conviction through rational argument. Leibniz's cosmopolitan ethics in some sense has to be Eurocentric, given its context and sources, yet he stressed—if he did not consistently practice—the mutuality of learning from and teaching others as well as charity in the broadest sense in order to enable precisely such exchanges. Charitable interpretation is justified through both pragmatic and religious reasons based on ultimately humanistic ethical grounds.

Leibniz uses "understanding the other better than he/she understands herself" self-critically in regard to Europe, since Europeans, as part of their progress, should strive for a more perfect and moral way of life. Despite the limits of Leibniz's model, when Leibniz makes Christianity the truth of Confucian and neo-Confucian beliefs while excluding Buddhism and Daoism (which he labels, following his sources, as idolatrous and sorcerous), it is the principle of Pauline charity applied to interpretative questions that opened up his own perspective to the perspective of the other, however inadequately understood. This helped him achieve a positive, if fragmentary and imperfect, recognition and appreciation of Chinese thought and practices in their own terms as

53. CCC §11 / WC 64; BJC 487.

well as his own. Such an understanding of the other's self-understanding is elemental to hermeneutics.

Although the Christian faith remained an ultimate yet indemonstrable truth for Leibniz, this claim was not used to exclude rational argumentation and inquiry.⁵⁴ Indeed, Leibniz affirmed the compatibility and the necessity of faith for reason, and interpreted religion as the only genuine universal and cosmopolitan society. Since morality is inseparable from religious belief for Leibniz, there cannot be a universal cosmopolitanism that lacks reference to and context in a particular nexus of beliefs and practices, such as the enlightened Christianity that consists of the charity of the wise. If it turns out that this Christian content makes a difference to Leibniz's project of an enlightened and cosmopolitan ethics, then the subtraction of cultural and religious content (whether Christian, Chinese, or otherwise) potentially threatens to turn intercultural dialogue into an empty discourse in which formal agreement is posited at the expense of the rich plurality of and reasonable argumentation between concrete forms of life.

Leibniz's Legacy in Christian Wolff

Zilu asked about serving ghosts and spirits. The Master said, "You are not even able to serve people, how can you serve ghosts and spirits?"

"May I inquire about death?"

*"You do not even understand life, how can you understand death?"*⁵⁵

A question one might ask of Leibniz's practice of interpretation: Does the principle of charity—which calls for approaching the interpreted from its own perspective or from its own internal standard—complement or contradict the principle of "understanding better"—which

54. A. Bardon examined the consistency of Leibniz's interpretation of the Christian mysteries as true yet incomprehensible to human understanding in "Leibniz on the Epistemic Status of the Mysteries," *Philosophy and Theology* 13, no. 1 (2001): 143–58.

55. Attributed to Confucius, *Analects*, 11.12.

operates according to one's own standard of what counts as rational—and can dialogue between different religions, philosophies, and cultures be based on either or both premises? That is, in the case of Leibniz, does rational hermeneutics achieve what it aims to accomplish?

Leibniz's project of promoting the conditions for cross-cultural communication and exchange based on pragmatic strategies of charitable interpretation, which are oriented by a moral conception of reason and religious understanding of human nature, raised difficult questions that would continue to haunt Wolff in the next generation. In this section, I will briefly summarize a strategy for interpreting Wolff's approach to China that extends and supports the account of Leibniz articulated in this paper.

Wolff explicitly switches the debate concerning the Chinese from the issue of natural theology to that of natural morality. Of course, natural theology was already primarily natural morality for Leibniz, and Wolff was also committed to the project of natural theology as much as Leibniz was.⁵⁶ This transition is important, however, as Wolff articulates to a greater degree the idea that natural morality is prior to and separate from any type of theology. The bracketing of "natural theology" entailed that the interpretation of Chinese culture could proceed on the basis of common and overlapping moral truths while excluding the divisive theological concerns at the heart of the Chinese rites controversy.

Wolff's lecture on "The Practical Philosophy of the Chinese" (1721) emphasizes, as Leibniz already had, the superiority of Chinese moral and political practices over those of the Europeans. Keeping in mind one strategy of the Enlightenment that idealized the foreign in order to critique the native, as in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Wolff moves the issue from natural theology to natural morality based on a metaphysical and natural scientific account of the "forces of nature." These natural forces inform both human nature and its rationality. Like Kant later in the eighteenth century, Wolff argues that morality does not presuppose or require religion, not even in the rational form of natural

56. See Charles Corr's account of the role of natural theology in Wolff's philosophy in "The Existence of God, Natural Theology, and Christian Wolff," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (1973): 105–18.

theology, and that at most religion is the fulfillment of morality.⁵⁷ For Wolff, Europeans could communicate and learn from the Chinese on the basis of rationality and a common human nature. In Wolff's lecture on Chinese morality, Wolff provocatively compares Confucius to Jesus and Moses as exemplary figures of wisdom, and affirms the moral and political superiority of the pagan Chinese over the Christian Europeans in pursuing natural morality in accordance with the "forces of nature" (*Kräfte der Natur*).⁵⁸

Wolff's lecture was subsequently first published by his Pietist opponents. Wolff compares Confucius to Jesus only in his function as a teacher who provided a measure for ethics and politics, and argues that Confucius had a more similar role and comportment to Moses.⁵⁹ This publication led to his condemnation by the Pietists, his expulsion from the University of Halle and Prussia at the order of the monarch, and initiated a second European-wide controversy over Chinese ethics and politics in comparison with those of Europe.⁶⁰ Despite famously mocking Leibniz in *Candide* for his perfectionism, a principle Wolff also maintained, Voltaire defended the Leibnizian Wolff for praising and doing justice to the Chinese.⁶¹

Wolff's proto-Kantian argument for the autonomy of ethics did not lead him to reject religion. He retained a supplementary and fulfilling role for natural and revealed theology in his philosophy. Because of his advocacy of enlightened religion, Wolff was condemned by the Pietists for marginalizing revelation.⁶² The Pietists not only feared his rationalism; they also noticed that Wolff focused on moral and political forms of life in his reflections on China and that he did not address questions of faith. He did not address the religious exchange between

57. For a discussion of the "autonomy of morality" in Wolff and the importance of this claim in his interpretation of China, see Julia Ching, "Christian Wolff and China: The Autonomy of Morality," *Filozofska Istrazivanja* 29, no. 2 (1989): 441–48; and the introduction to J. Ching and W. G. Oxtoby, *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1992).

58. Wolff, *Philosophie der Chinesen*, 50–51, 116–21.

59. *Ibid.*, 118–19.

60. *Ibid.*, 116–17, 120–21.

61. Voltaire, "On China," 112–13.

62. Corr examines the religious and theological dimensions of Wolff's dispute with the Pietists in "Existence of God," 105–18.

faiths or the issue of conversion to Christianity, as was still the case with Leibniz's concern with the natural theology of the Chinese.

In his analysis and evaluation of Wolff's discourse on the Chinese, Loudon argues that Wolff's interpretation of Confucian ethics was strongly influenced by his own ethical commitments, as presented in his "German Ethics" of 1720.⁶³ Although it is true that any particular way or mode of understanding interprets the other according to its own conceptual resources, Wolff's procedure is not only an example of how philosophers' own conceptual commitments stand in the way of cross-cultural understanding; Wolff's ethical commitments are also an example of how an account of moral rationality can open a space for cross-cultural understanding and dialogue, even if in a limited and flawed way.⁶⁴

Unlike many of his compatriots and most philosophers for the next two hundred years, who, like Kant, Hegel, or Marx, would find little of value in Chinese thought and culture, Wolff was able to engage Chinese thought in a rich and fruitful dialogue that had implications for how he conceived the moral and natural world. One reason for this is that Wolff's rationalism, like that of Leibniz before him, is fundamentally experimental and hypothesis-driven.⁶⁵ It is not enough to look at the content of Wolff's ethics in order to understand Wolff's interpretation of the Chinese. Instead, one must consider its ethical modality and articulate the context and basis of Wolff's approach to Chinese morality; that is, his theory of practical and theoretical reason and how it informs his hermeneutics.

Conclusion

I have argued that promoting the rationality of the other in interpretation has been at least partially successful in Leibniz and Wolff's writings

63. Loudon, "Confucian Ethics," 83.

64. *Ibid.*, 81–85.

65. Philosophy proceeds experimentally and hypothetically from the empirical to the rational, according to Wolff, in works such as *Discursus Praeiminaris de Philosophia in Genera* § 11–12, § 126–27 / *Einleitende Abhandlung über Philosophie im allgemeinen* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2006), 7–8, 75–76.

concerning China. Despite the considerable limits and misinterpretations inherent in enlightened authoritarianism and Eurocentric cosmopolitanism, to use Mungello's term, these weaknesses imperfectly suggest a critical model for a hermeneutics that is not solely governed by suspicion of the beliefs and motives of others. Further, the legacy of Leibniz's encounter with descriptions of Chinese practices and beliefs can be further traced in Wolff's engagement with Chinese thought, and in the early development of hermeneutics in Wolff's works and in those of his students such as Georg Friedrich Meier. Meier's rationalistic hermeneutics was a central point of departure and an object of critique for Schleiermacher's groundbreaking reinterpretation of the art of interpretation.

It is a primary characteristic of the development of hermeneutics in Wolff and Meier that hermeneutics, the science of knowing meaning from signs, is based in the principle of charity for the sake of achieving both justice as well as truth in interpretation.⁶⁶ According to Meier, interpretation presupposes love and justice.⁶⁷ Interpretation is in this sense the opposite of the suspicion that reduces the author to an identity that she or he would not recognize. Likewise, the maxim of charity is associated with the goal of understanding the author's intentions in communication, and "understanding better" as identifying the truth and validity of what the author has expressed. Even if all interpretation involves a differentiation from the author, Meier insists on differentiating the reciprocal moments of understanding and understanding better insofar as the former has priority over the latter out of justice and fairness to the author.⁶⁸

66. On charity or fairness (*Billigkeit*) in Meier, see A. Bühler and L. C. Madonna's introduction to their edition of G. F. Meier, *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), 77–84.

67. *Ibid.*, 77.

68. *Ibid.*, 72–74.