Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm (1646–1716)

Eric S. Nelson

Leibniz was born near the conclusion of the chaotic period of the Thirty Years War. He studied law and then spent much of his life in the service of nobility and royalty, particularly the House of Hanover that assumed the British Crown a few years before his death. Best known for his works on metaphysics, mathematics, and logic, Leibniz's extensive political correspondence and writings concerned the foundations of law, local and international political affairs and social problems, and moral and political philosophy.

Recent commentators have emphasized either Leibniz's backward-looking traditionalism in striving for a morally oriented and religiously informed legal and political philosophy (Riley 1996) or his progressive modernism in applying the model of the new mathematical sciences to law and politics so that he becomes a primary source for the subordination of legal thinking to a positivistic scientific model (Berkowitz 2005). Both of these approaches capture dimensions of his thought. Leibniz's efforts – beginning with his early juridical works – endeavor to preserve by reforming traditional Pauline Christian and classical Platonic conceptions of law and politics through their modernistic philosophical rationalization. Yet his new method of jurisprudence was never merely the application of the geometrical method to law and the reduction of justice to legality (Berkowitz 2005). It was an attempt to formulate a new method of learning and teaching jurisprudence in the context of furthering practical and theoretical enlightenment and human well-being. For the early as well as the mature Leibniz, the legal and political spheres necessarily lead to considerations of the good and God's justice. His conception of reason implies that normative reasoning about ends guides instrumental rational calculations about means. This is evident in Leibniz's early legal writings. These works expressed how positive civil law is based in natural law, and offers both grounds of justification and norms that guide reform and renewal. Roman legal thinking and Pauline charity do not simply serve as a conservative rhetoric for Leibniz; they were sources of his project of enlightened reform through the use and extension of reason.

The youthful Leibniz declined a career in the university. His practical interests and reformist tendencies led him into the service of the archbishop and elector of Mainz (Antognazza 2009: 79). From 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 diverse intersecting powers. This plurality of distinct overlapping centers of powers was condemned as irregular and monstrous by von Pufendorf and justified by Leibniz as a check on absolutism. In a series of polemical writings, Leibniz challenged the internal and external imperial expansionism of the absolutist French monarch, the "Most Christian War-God," Louis XIV (Leibniz 1988: 121–45).

In his theoretical political writings, Leibniz criticized the vision of absolute unified sovereignty maintained by Hobbes and von Pufendorf. Leibniz had ambivalent views throughout his career of early modern thinkers of sovereign power such as Hobbes and von Pufendorf. On the one hand, he recognized the strengths of Hobbes's perspective even as, on the other hand, he critiqued it for reviving Thrasymachus's position in the *Republic* that justice is the interest of the stronger and theological voluntarism that transformed the justice and goodness of God into an arbitrary political despotism.

Based on his pragmatic political experiences, Leibniz recommended that we "imagine things at their worst in politics" while "imagining things at their best in morality" (Leibniz 1988: 81). Even though Leibniz appears to be tied 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 Paul and Augustine, he stressed their mutuality and the moral nature 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, as enlightened love, and as a universal benevolence informed by prudence. This mediation of morality and knowledge is the basis for his applied utilitarian "science of felicity" that ought to orient and guide enlightened policy.

Leibniz maintained Platonic ideas of the priority of the wise in governing and the role of providence in human affairs. From this Platonic perspective, Leibniz rejected Locke's social contract theory, including the principle of equal natural rights, and appealed to providence to justify obedience to de facto regimes in his critique of William Sherlock's *Case of Allegiance* (Leibniz 1988).

Unlike Kant's response to the problem of morality and prudence (Nelson 2004), Leibniz directly retained the eudaemonist dimension of the political. 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 well-being of society, humanity, and God's creation. This argumentation led him to connect human justice with divine justice (theodicy), agreeing with Plato that the divine follows the good rather than the good being posited through the will (Leibniz 1988: 45). Leibniz rejected both legal positivism, which conflates actual force and positive laws with justice, and voluntarism, which prioritizes the arbitrary will and power of kings and God. Positivism and voluntarism reduce the political to the relativism of might makes right, and undermine possibilities of criticism and complaint that are needed for enlightened reform (Leibniz 1988: 47–8). Belief in the primacy of the will and coercive power independent of reasons undermines justice and goodness (Leibniz 1985: 59). Leibniz reasoned that even God's will obeys the good that is the object of divine understanding and, furthermore, that there is a common conception of justice that orients both humans and God (Leibniz 1985: 94; 1988: 45–64).

Leibniz advocated limited monarchy, arguing for the diversity of powers as a restriction on the abuse of authority. Notions of publicity and accountability are constitutive of Leibniz's interpretation of political authority. His nominal definition of justice is "a constant will to act in such a way that no one has reason to complain" (Leibniz 1988: 53). This point is explained in his account of the degrees of justice that ascend from the legal to the ethical to the religious, which emerged in his earlier interpretation of Roman law and Pauline charity (Schneider 1967): (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" 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: 171–2).

Leibniz's theoretical and practical politics converged in his humanistic and cosmopolitan vision that is reflected in his diverse efforts at peace and reconciliation between distinct and conflicting perspectives. A number of his writings and correspondences 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 China (Nelson 2009; 2011).

SEE ALSO: Augustine of Hippo: Aurelius Augustinus (354–430); Hobbes, Thomas (1588–1679); Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804); Locke, John (1632–1704); Plato (429–347 BCE); von Pufendorf, Samuel (1632–94)

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Further Reading

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