LEIBNIZ AS A VIRTUE ETHICIST

Hao Dong

Johns Hopkins University

Abstract: In this paper I argue that Leibniz's ethics is a kind of virtue ethics where virtues of the agent are explanatorily primary. I first examine how Leibniz obtained his conception of justice as a kind of love in an early text, *Elements of Natural Law*. I show that in this text Leibniz's goal was to find a satisfactory definition of justice that could reconcile egoism with altruism, and that this was achieved through the Aristotelian virtue of friendship where friends treat each other as "other selves." Following this decisive moment, Leibniz adopted an Aristotle-inspired ethical framework where the virtuous agent is central for moral evaluations. I then show that, despite certain developments, Leibniz's ethics retained this essential feature throughout his career. In Leibniz's later writings, God constitutes the foundation of the moral realm, and the fundamental moral endeavor of human beings consists in the imitation of God.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I propose and defend the claim that Leibniz's ethics is a kind of virtue ethics inspired by Aristotle.[1] Of course, as is characteristic of Leibniz's philosophical eclecticism, Leibniz's ethics

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[1] As far as I know, this claim has not yet been explicitly proposed. Scholarship on Leibniz's ethics often emphasizes its Platonic and patristic background (e.g., Riley, 1996, Mercer, 2004) and tends to pay little attention to a possible Aristotelian influence, even though Jakob Thomasius, Leibniz's mentor in Leipzig, was a staunch advocate of Aristotelianism in general, especially Aristotle's ethics (Leibniz made a series of notes of Thomasius's *Philosophia Practica* (A VI.1, 42–67; for abbreviations and citation formats of Leibniz's works see the end of the paper) during 1663–64, which was roughly a summary of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*). An exception is Terence Irwin, who notes the influence from Aristotelian eudaemonism on Leibniz (Irwin, 2008, pp. 311–31), but Irwin has not amplified this claim, and he thinks that Leibniz's position is in the end inconclusive and could be interpreted as utilitarian (Irwin, 2008, p. 320). Similarly, Youpa (2016) reads Leibniz's ethics as "perfectionist," but he is rather vague about the nature of Leibniz's perfectionism. By contrast, most scholars who are more explicit about the nature of Leibniz's ethics interpret it as a kind of consequentialism. See Brown (2011), Brown (2016), Frey (2016),

synthesizes various strands of thought, including Epicurean hedonism, Hobbesian egoism, Christian morality, Platonic ideas about the Good, etc. Thus, I do not mean to argue that Leibniz's ethics is a kind of virtue ethics to the exclusion of all these views. Nonetheless, I think it could be established as a historical fact that the influence of Aristotle's ethics was decisive in shaping Leibniz's mature view of justice as a kind of love; furthermore, in Leibniz's ethics the consideration of the qualities of the agent (i.e., virtues or vices) is prior to other considerations such as consequences of an action and moral obligations.[2] Therefore, it is historically and philosophically defensible to call Leibniz a virtue ethicist.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section 2, I will describe the struggle undergone by the young Leibniz to reconcile egoism with altruism in a series of drafts titled *Elements of Natural Law* (*Elementa Juris Naturalis*, *EJN* henceforth). This struggle has attracted the attention of commentators because Leibniz came to his mature definition of justice as a kind of love for the first time precisely because he thought love could reconcile egoism with altruism: in loving others, we desire their good for the sake of themselves and take pleasure in it. What has seldom been noted by commentators, however, is that Leibniz's view of love was taken from Aristotle's discussions on the virtue of friendship (*philia*), one of whose main features is that friends wish goods to each other for the sake of the friends themselves. After this decisive moment, Leibniz systematically adopted Aristotle's ethical vocabulary and ideas in the last drafts of *EJN* and defined justice as the

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Hruschka (1991), Rutherford (1995), Rutherford (2014), Schneewind (1998, pp. 236–59). There are also scholars who propose that Leibniz's ethics approaches Kantian deontology, see Johns (2013), Darwall (2023, pp. 152–64); for criticisms, see Rutherford (2014), Brown (2016). My main target in this paper is the consequentialist interpretation, though I will also say something about the deontological interpretation in section 2.3 and at the beginning of section 4.

[2] Throughout this paper I take as an essential and distinguishing feature of virtue ethics that the virtues of the agent are explanatorily primary for evaluating their actions. Cf. Watson (1990) and Kawall (2009). While in the last few decades virtue ethics so construed has been developed based on readings of Aristotle's ethical theory (see Hursthouse, 1999, Annas, 2011), there are scholars who dispute whether Aristotle was actually a virtue ethicist. For instance, Hirji (2019) argues that for Aristotle virtues of the agent are explanatorily posterior to the ends that the actions aim to realize. While in this paper I am not concerned with Aristotle interpretation, I think there is evidence that Leibniz was reading Aristotle along the lines of contemporary virtue ethicists. Therefore, just like contemporary virtue ethicists, Leibniz developed his version of virtue ethics through engaging with the works of Aristotle. But (as can be expected) Leibniz's theoretical motivation for adopting virtue ethics was much different from that of contemporary virtue ethicists, as I will show in section 2.

virtue of universal love in accordance with prudence or practical wisdom. Turning to Leibniz's later ethical writings in section 3, I will examine Leibniz's mature definition of justice as "charity of the wise" (*caritas sapientis*). I will show that, while this definition is similar in spirit with Leibniz's earlier Aristotelian view obtained in *EJN*, it embodies an implicit development insofar as goodness is now primarily understood as a metaphysical notion, in terms of the degree of perfection. This is why Leibniz adopted the notion of *sapientia*, which was commonly understood as theoretical wisdom. I will then explain how this development could potentially make Leibniz's ethics consequentialist in nature, because it seems to be based on the principle of the maximization of perfection. In section 4, I will defend the aretaic interpretation against the consequentialist interpretation in two moves, by considering the case of God and the case of human agents. I will argue that in both cases the evaluation of the consequences of an action is posterior to the evaluation of the qualities of the agent. The picture that emerges is that in Leibniz's mature system, the divine virtues of wisdom and charity constitute the foundation of justice, and the duty of human beings consists in the imitation of God and his virtues. This theory that is centered around the virtuous agent is essentially the same with the one reached at the end of *EJN*, and it has significant commonalities with contemporary virtue ethical theories. Finally, as concluding remarks, I will explain two possible reasons why Leibniz was attracted to his virtue ethics: first, Leibniz's virtue ethics fits particularly well with his theism according to which God is the ultimate reason for everything; second, it synthesizes the diverse strands of ethical views previously mentioned.

2. Leibniz's Discovery of Love and Conversion to Virtue Ethics

Around 1670 one of Leibniz's main occupations was to develop a reformed legal system built upon firm rational foundations—a new "science" of natural law.[3] Leibniz's work on this new science is contained in six drafts, composed during 1669–71, collectively titled *Elementa Juris Naturalis* (A VI.1, N.12).[4] Leibniz's central goal in *EJN* is to find a satisfactory definition of justice, on which

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[3] See, e.g., Letter to Conring, Jan. 16, 1670 (A II.1, 45–48); Letter to Graevius, Apr. 1670 (A II.1, 60); Letter to van Velthuysen, Apr. 1670 (A II.1, 63–64); Letter to Jean Chaplain (A II.1, 88–89).

[4] The title is justified based on what Leibniz himself says: "Therefore I am mainly working on three things: Two Elements, one of Roman Law, […] another Elements of natural Law demonstrated in a short book […] Third, the Rearranged Corpus itself of Roman Law" (A II.1, 88). The "Elements of Roman Law" refers to *Elementa Juris*

the rest of natural law is based. As pointed out above, one of the reasons that *EJN* has been studied by scholars is that these six drafts faithfully present the dialectical process through which Leibniz arrived at his definition of justice as a kind of love.[5] In this section I will put forward my reading of this process, showing how the influence from Aristotle was decisive. This section is divided into three subsections, according to (as I read it) the three stages of the dialectical process: first, Leibniz finds himself caught up in a dilemma between egoism and altruism in the first two drafts of *EJN* (in what follows, I will use subscripts to indicate drafts of *EJN*, so the first two drafts will be EJN_{1-2}); then, in EJN_{3-4}, Leibniz comes to realize that love, modelled on the Aristotelian virtue of friendship, is the key to resolving this dilemma; finally, in EJN_{5-6}, Leibniz elaborates his system of natural law based on the new definition of justice as a kind of love, where Aristotelian influence is even more conspicuous.

2.1. Between self-interest and public interest: Leibniz's aporia

Before *EJN*, one of Leibniz's most direct definitions of justice was proposed in the *New Method for Teaching and Learning Jurisprudence* (1667):

> The just and the unjust are whatever that is publicly useful or harmful. (A VI.1, 300–1; translations in this paper are mine if not otherwise indicated)

It is uncertain to what extent Leibniz was committed to this definition, or whether Leibniz was speaking in his own voice, since at the beginning of EJN_1 Leibniz attributes a similar definition of justice as "what benefits the conservation of society" to Grotius[6] and proceeds to present a critique

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Civilis (A VI.2, N.29), which was basically completed by 1672, and the "Rearranged Corpus itself of Roman Law" is sketched in *Ratio Corporis Juris Reconcinnandi* (A VI.2, N.30).

[5] See Brown (2011), Goldenbaum (2002), Goldenbaum (2009), Mulvaney (1968). I agree with the gist of their interpretations, namely Leibniz associates justice with love because love could reconcile egoism with altruism. My interpretation develops their reading insofar as I take a more holistic consideration of the six drafts as a whole. For instance, these commentators have mostly focused on the fourth draft of *EJN* and not sufficiently exposed the delicate dialectical process in the previous drafts; furthermore, they have not discussed the last two drafts of *EJN* where Leibniz's system of natural law is more fully developed around the virtuous agent. Moreover, the positive influence of Aristotle has not been noticed.

[6] A VI.1, p. 431, line 12; cf. Grotius (2005, pp. 85–86).

of this view. The main idea of the critique is that, if justice were defined in terms of public interest, then it would be just to, for example, die for one's country so that others could be saved; but, according to Leibniz,

> To undergo the greatest harm for the sake of the interest of others is stupid [*stultum*], but nothing stupid is just. (A VI.1, 431, lines 17–18)

The premise that "nothing stupid is just" expresses the commonly accepted view that justice conforms to rationality, and Leibniz's main additional premise here is that it never seems to be rational to subordinate one's self-interest to the interest of others. The influence from modern moral thinkers such as Hobbes was obviously important for convincing Leibniz of the rationality of pursuing one's self-interest.[7] But while self-interest is emphasized here, public interest is not entirely disregarded; indeed, Leibniz only says that it is irrational to undergo the "*greatest* harm for the sake of the interest of others," but not that it is irrational to pursue public interest to any degree. So to what extent does justice demand that we pursue self-interest and public interest? This is the question that Leibniz leaves unanswered in *EJN*₁ and will take up in *EJN*₂.

    *EJN*₂ is the longest among all the drafts, but ironically, also the least studied as well. This is likely due to the experimental nature of the draft: there Leibniz constantly tries out and retracts ideas, goes on lengthy excursions, asking all sorts of questions without answering them. But it deserves a prominent place in the history of ethics: its methodology is strikingly similar to that of contemporary ethicists who use thought experiments to motivate and test a certain general principle, and some of the thought experiments used by Leibniz anticipate some of the most important thought experiments in contemporary ethics;[8] here one could also find one of the most

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[7] Cf. Hobbes's general characterization natural law in Hobbes (1994, p. 79).

[8] Leibniz summarizes the method used in *EJN* in *EJN*₄ (A VI.1, 461, lines 6–17/L 133), which is very similar to the method of reflective equilibrium. And some of the interesting thought experiments used by Leibniz are: 1) a scenario where two people are drowning and one could only save one—Leibniz also complicates the scenario by imagining that one of them is a friend, or someone that is significant for the well-being of others, etc. (A VI.1, 439–40); 2) a scenario where one alone has a cure for a disease or sufficient sustenance (A VI.1, 440–41); 3) a scenario where one has to harm or even kill another to save oneself or someone important (A VI.1, 441–42).

unambiguous precursors to Scanlon's contractualism;[9] and Leibniz seems to be the first to propose Taurek's number problem, along with Taurek's solution to the problem.[10]

But to get back on track—since what was ruled out in EJN_1 is the definition of justice as public interest, in EJN_2 Leibniz starts by building justice from self-interest:

> Thus, justice would in the end be the prudence by which we do not harm others or benefit others on account of punishment or reward. (A VI.1, 435, lines 9–11)

> Generally: Justice is the prudence in doing good to others or not harming others for the sake of doing good or not harming oneself (that is, for the sake of obtaining reward or avoiding punishment) by this declaration of intention. (A VI.1, 435, lines 12–14)

The main idea is that public interest is consistent with self-interest insofar as we are rewarded for doing good to others and punished for harming others. So it is not stupid or irrational to pursue public interest insofar as doing so ultimately serves our self-interest. And justice now turns out to

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[9] "The just is what someone could justify in the assembly of humankind, if all of them are supposed to be wise" (A VI.1, 442, lines 32–33). Leibniz often repeats this thought in other writings, e.g., "the just is that about which others cannot complain without reason" (EJN_3, A VI.1, 455, line 17), "justice is a constant will to act in such a way that no one has a reason to complain of us" (*Sur la notion commune de la justice* [1703], A IV.10, 31/PW 53). But Leibniz thinks that this only serves as a "nominal definition" (ibid.), i.e., it only points to a feature of justice by which we could recognize it, but it does not reveal the nature of justice itself. One could also see a shift to the emphasis on the quality of the agent in Leibniz's later writings. For Scanlon's formulation of contractualism, see Scanlon (1998, p. 153).

[10] Leibniz presents a series of scenarios where one could only save a particular individual that is dear to oneself or several others and ends with a question "Are numbers relevant to the issue at all?" (A VI.1, 443, lines 22–23) While Leibniz did not provide an answer to this question, in some of the similar cases he proposed that the decision should be left to fate or luck (*fortuna*) since *fortuna* is a judge "with whom no one can be angry" (A VI.1, 442, line 20). However, according to Leibniz's mature position of justice as a kind of universal love, it seems that numbers do count. But it is not entirely clear what Leibniz's mature answer would be since he did not consider similar cases in later writings. Cf. Taurek (1977).

be a kind of instrumental rationality in finding out the best way to satisfy our self-interest in dealing with others, which Leibniz calls "prudence."[11]

How much public interest can be truly incorporated with self-interest in this way? It seems that according to the conception of justice as prudence, to what extent it is demanded by justice to do good to others or not harm others depends on how much reward or punishment one can expect to receive in return. When there is no guarantee for future reward or punishment, it is only rational, or just, to disregard others entirely. For example, Leibniz asks whether one is obliged to do good to another even when doing so is seemingly harmless, like in the case of lighting another's torch with one's own:

> I am indeed obliged to do so, if it is guaranteed to me the same in return. Indeed, we must think that this benefit is harmful because of the very fact that in virtue of it one may recover or demand something in some other respect that could be asked with equal right. Therefore, if someone plans to light their torch with my torch, I am indeed obliged to help them, if I have reason to believe that they will also provide me with as much benefit as I provide them. (A VI.1, 447, lines 23–27)

When we benefit others, we temporarily suffer some loss because this act gives us the right to demand something in return which is yet to be materialized. Therefore, since justice consists in pursuing one's self-interest, no one is obliged to benefit others unless they have reason to expect at least as much in return.

But what can give one the reason to believe that they will receive proportionate reward for their kindness? Later in *EJN*₂, Leibniz's answer seems to be that it is only within a functioning society that one has the reason to act for the sake of public interest, since one can reasonably expect either that others would be under the pressure to pay them back, or that one would receive reward indirectly through improving the social order which ultimately safeguards one's own security.[12]

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[11] Leibniz's conception of prudence here is again influenced by Hobbes. Cf. Hobbes's definition of prudence in Hobbes (1994, p. 40). Mulvaney (1968, p. 62) thinks that this is the Aristotelian conception of prudence, which is clearly wrong. Leibniz will use "prudence" in the Aristotelian sense after he converts to Aristotle's ethical framework, as we shall see.

[12] A VI.1, 444, lines 17–21; 446, lines 18–20; 447, lines 17–20.

However, in this way whether one should act for the sake of public interest would be contingent upon the existence of a functioning society; in other words, public interest would not be part of natural law which is valid even without any societies. This seems to be a consequence which Leibniz does not want to accept.[13]

Leibniz is thus stuck in a dilemma: on the one hand, if justice is defined in terms of public interest, then it would demand stupid actions; on the other hand, if justice is defined in terms of self-interest, then public interest would only be of instrumental value and should be pursued depending on specific circumstances. This dilemma is vividly captured in the series of attempts to define justice at the end of *EJN*₂. At first, Leibniz confidently recapitulates his definition of justice as "the prudence of helping and harming because of reward and punishment" (A VI.1, 453, lines 23–24); but as he proceeds, he becomes less and less sure and even ends up saying "justice is the constant endeavor towards common happiness with one's own happiness untouched" (A VI.1, 454, line 24), which is in tension with the previous definition.

2.2. Friendship and love: how Aristotle saved the day

In this section I will argue that Leibniz comes out of the dilemma by modelling his definition of justice as love on Aristotle's conception of the virtue of friendship.[14] While a connection between "love" and "friendship" might seem surprising from a contemporary perspective, these notions were closely intertwined at the time of Leibniz through the Latin reception of Aristotle. Aquinas, for example, said that four Latin terms, *amor* ("love"), *dilectio* ("dilection"), *caritas* ("charity"), and *amicitia* ("friendship"), "in one way or another point to the same thing,"[15] and used the term "love of friendship" (*amor amicitiae*) to denote love "with respect to the one that someone wills a good for";[16] furthermore, he argued that *caritas*, the greatest of all virtues, was *amicitia*.[17]

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[13] At the beginning of *EJN*₂, Leibniz says that "a just person should not only not harm another without their own necessity, but also help another" (A VI.1, 433, lines 16–17). So the defect of the definition of justice in terms of self-interest is that it fails to incorporate this intuition about justice.

[14] Aristotle explicitly calls friendship a virtue at the beginning of his discussions of friendship, *EN* VIII.1, 1155a3–4.

[15] *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1-2, Question 26, Article 3. Translations of the *Summa Theologiae* are by Alfred Freddoso.

[16] *Summa Theologiae*, Part 1-2, Question 26, Article 4.

[17] *Summa Theologiae*, Part 2-2, Question 23, Article 1.

Aristotle's discussions of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN* henceforth; translations of *EN* are by Irwin from (Aristotle 2019)) and the *Rhetoric* were explicitly referenced in all these texts, which shows that people in the Latin tradition had long realized that this notion was related to various kinds of loving relationships and was not restricted to what we would now call friendship. Furthermore, for Aristotle friendship also has strong political overtones and is explicitly connected with justice.[18]

As someone who had been well-acquainted with the scholastic tradition from an early age and with Aristotle's works (most likely in their original language) through the mentorship of Jakob Thomasius, Leibniz must have realized the wide connotation of the notion of friendship. Indeed, when he first started to connect justice with love in *EJN₃*, he used love and friendship interchangeably, defining justice as "the virtue of loving or friendship [*virtus amandi seu amicitiae*]" (A VI.1, 455, lines 24–25). Similar phenomena can be found in Leibniz's later writings as well.[19] Therefore, love and friendship are not entirely separate concepts for Leibniz.

Having cleared up the terminological obstacle, let's see how Leibniz gradually gravitates towards Aristotelian friendship and why Leibniz is attracted to it as a definition of justice. As discussed in 2.1, Leibniz was caught up in the dilemma between defining justice in terms of public interest and defining it in terms of self-interest. To get out of the dilemma, Leibniz first turns to an Aristotle-inspired conception of justice that he once entertained as a student:

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[18] See statements like "friendship would seem to hold cities together" (*EN* VIII.3, 1155a), "the justice that is most just seems to belong to friendship" (ibid., 1155a29). Leibniz seems to follow Aristotle rather faithfully in *Divisio Societatum* (1680), A IV.3, 911–12/PW 79–80.

[19] For example, in *Elementa Vera Pietatis* (1677–78), Leibniz distinguishes "true love" from "friendship on account of utility [*amicitia utilitatis causa*]" (A VI.4, 1357), which recapitulates a similar distinction in Aristotle between "complete friendship" on the one hand, and "friendship for pleasure" or "friendship for utility" on the other (*EN* VIII.3). In *De Justitia ac Amore Voluntateque Dei* (1680–88), Leibniz equates the kind of true love he has in mind with the "*amor amicitiae*" of the scholastics (A VI.4, 2892), and as I noted, Aristotle is the direct source of the scholastic notion of *amor amicitiae*. In *Ad Scientiam Generalem Praefatio* (1688), Leibniz says that "science and friendship [*scientia et amicitia*]" are what most conduce to our happiness, where science is taken to be theoretical knowledge that "exposes the foundations of things," friendship the social virtue that makes us "more secure by mutual assistance [*mutuo adjutorio*]" (A VI.4, 984).

Whether justice is a virtue preserving the mean [*mediocritatem*] between the two affections of man towards man—love and hate [*amorem et odium*]? As a boy I satisfied myself greatly with this meditation, for being fresh from the Peripetatic school, I could not digest the fact that while all the other virtues are taken to be the regulator [*moderatricem*] of affections, justice alone is taken to be the regulator of things. (*EJN*₄, A VI.1, 462, lines 31–34; translation improved from L 135. Cf. *EJN*₃, A VI.1, 455, lines 3–6)[20]

Leibniz recounts that he discovered this definition of justice through an apparent discrepancy in Aristotle's account of justice: for Aristotle almost all the main virtues, such as bravery and temperance, are about our affections such as fear and pleasure, while only justice is about external goods, e.g., in distributive justice and commutative justice.[21] So the young Leibniz proposed the definition of justice as the regulator of the affections of love and hate to make the whole account more uniform.

Although Leibniz soon rejects this juvenile definition mainly on the ground that it does not seem unjust to love another too much (A VI.1, 463, lines 9–12), this only means that Leibniz is not satisfied with the doctrine of the mean, but not that he abandons the Aristotelian framework of virtue ethics entirely. Indeed, this passage in *EJN*₄ and its counterpart in *EJN*₃ seem to constitute a watershed moment after which Aristotelian vocabulary begins to appear more and more frequently (more on this in 2.3). Furthermore, once we know that Aristotle's ethics was on Leibniz's mind when he was trying to find a way out of his dilemma, it is not hard to see why friendship, the virtue that received the lengthiest treatment in *EN*, would be the obvious candidate for reconciling self-interest with public interest.

Central to Aristotle's account of friendship is a kind of goodwill or benevolence (*eunoia*) that consists in wishing goods for the friend *for their own sake* (*ekeinou heneka/autou charin*).[22] Such benevolence for the friend's own sake is possible because, as Aristotle explains, it ultimately

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[20] This definition is in fact recorded in Leibniz's earlier writings, see A VI.1, 229–30. And the criticism that Aristotle's conceptions of justice is inconsistent with his conceptions of the other views is there imputed to Grotius.

[21] Aristotle himself notes that justice is different from other virtues *EN* V.5, 1133b33–1134a6, because justice is about "an intermediate condition" (*meson*) in the distribution of good and bad.

[22] That a friend wishes goods to a friend for the latter's own sake is repeated throughout *EN* VIII–IX, see VIII.2, 1155b31–32; VIII.7, 1159a8–10; IV.4, 1169a2–5. Also see *Rhetoric*, II.4, 1135b36–1136a1.

derives from one's love or friendship towards oneself (*EN* IX.4, 1166a1–2): a friend, according to Aristotle's seemingly paradoxical characterization, is "another self" (*allos autos*; 1166a31–32). Therefore, a friend wishes goods for their friend not as a mere means to promote their own goods, but as an end in itself, because the well-being of the friend coincides with their own well-being. According to Julia Annas (1977), Aristotle's view of friends as other selves or alter egos was proposed as a solution to a dilemma about love in Plato's *Lysis*: on the one hand, it seems that we always love something because of some benefit for ourselves, but on the other hand, we are said to love someone only when we wish them well for their own sake. This dilemma is strikingly similar to the dilemma between self-interest and public interest faced by Leibniz in EJN_{1-2}.

While there is no reason to suppose that Leibniz knew anything about this context, it is very likely that a shrewd reader such as Leibniz could have had quickly realized that Aristotle's account of friendship could be precisely the way out of his own dilemma, especially given Leibniz's familiarity with the text acquired under the tutelage of Thomasius. Indeed, in his rationale for the new definition of justice in terms of love, traces of Aristotle are omnipresent:

> But how to reconcile these views to those given above, where we said that we do nothing deliberately except for our own good, since we now deny that we should seek the good of others for the sake of our own? They are to be reconciled, beyond doubt, by a certain principle which few have observed, but from which a great light can be thrown upon true jurisprudence as well as upon theology. The answer certainly depends upon the nature of love [*amoris*]. There is a twofold reason for desiring the good of others; one is for the sake of our own good, the other as if our own good [*quasi nostrum*].[23] The former is calculating [*aestimans*], the latter loving [*amans*]. The former is the affection of a master for his servant, the latter that of a father for his son; the former that of one in need toward the instrument for meeting his need, the latter that of a friend for his friend; the former for the sake of some other expected good, the latter in itself [*per se*]. But, you ask, how is it possible that the good of others should be the same as our own and yet sought for in itself? For otherwise the good of others can be our own good only as means, not as end. I reply on the contrary

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[23] Loemker mistranslated "*quasi nostrum*" as "as if for our own good" (L 136). This was first pointed out by Brown (2011), where he also discussed consequences of this mistranslation.

that it is also an end, something is sought in itself, when it is pleasant. (A VI.1, 464, lines
1–11; translation modified from L 136)

After briefly recounting his dilemma, Leibniz points out that the solution lies in love, since one loves another when the former desires the good of the latter as if the good is the former's own good. In this way, not only the good of the other is desired as an end, but also it is desired as one's self-interest. Thus, the gist of Leibnizian love consists in taking another person as an alter ego. Furthermore, the examples used by Leibniz to illustrate this kind of love also reveal its roots in Aristotelian friendship: it is said to exist between a father and a son as well as between a friend and a friend. The second example needs no further comments. With regard to father and son, *EN* VIII.12 is devoted to the friendships in families, where it is said that all species of familial friendship "seem to depend on paternal friendship. For a parent is fond of his children because he regards them as something of himself; and children are fond of a parent because they regard themselves as being from him" (1165b16–19).

Leibniz's statement that "something is sought in itself, when it is pleasant" might lead one into thinking that Leibniz is an egoist after all, since this statement seems to say that all goods, including the goods of the loved ones, are mere means for promoting one's own pleasure. This interpretation is not entirely wrong, but it overlooks the fact that the loved ones are taken to be alter egos. Similarly, Leibniz should not be read as adopting an entirely altruistic stance as well, since the loved ones are not taken to be others that have nothing to do with oneself. Therefore, we can both seek the good of others as an end in itself and derive pleasure from it as a result without treating either as a means to the other because the others in question are taken to be extensions of oneself.

But one might question how it is possible to take others as alter egos. To answer this question, Leibniz employs an analogy that compares minds to mirrors (*EJN*$_4$, A VI.1, 464, lines 23–30/L 137): when one has obtained some good and experiences pleasure, this is reflected in others' minds or mirrors and reflected again indefinitely; as a result, one can better observe and experience one's own good as it is reflected multiple times and thereby magnified in others' minds or mirrors. Thus, we are by nature inclined to experience what we observe in similar beings as our own. Aristotle explained in a similar way why even the blessed person still needs friends: this is

because the blessed person can observe the virtuous actions of their friends as their own and thereby derive pleasure from it (*EN* IX.9, 1169b28–1170a4).

This natural inclination to treat others as alter egos can however be corrupted by what Leibniz calls the "deformity" (*deformitas*) of the mind, which creates "shadows" that hinder the mutual reflection between minds (A VI.4, 464, lines 29–30). Whether one could take others as alter egos thus depends on the character of the mind in virtue of which it observes the actions and passions of others as their own. In this way Leibniz finally comes to define justice at the end of *EJN*4 in a paradigmatically Aristotelian way as a virtue of character in accordance with practical wisdom:

> Justice will therefore be the disposition [*habitus*] of loving others (or of seeking the good of others in itself and taking pleasure in the good of others), insofar as it can come about through prudence [*prudentiam*] (or as long as it is not the cause of greater pain). (A VI.4, 465, lines 5–7; translation modified from L 137)

Habitus is the Latin counterpart of *hexis* in Greek (both derive from the verb "to have"), commonly translated as "disposition" or "state." Most generally speaking, for Aristotle a disposition is a stable condition that is intermediate between potentiality and actuality.[24] In *EN* II.5, Aristotle famously identifies virtues of character as dispositions in relation to feelings or affections (*pathē*). Thus, the first half of Leibniz's definition of justice, "the disposition of loving others," describes a virtue of character, namely the just person is disposed to have the affection of love towards others or take others as alter egos. The latter half of the definition qualifies the disposition by saying that this virtue should be in accordance with prudence, which springs from the Aristotelian distinction between natural virtue (*aretē phusikē*) and full virtue (*aretē kuria*) in *EN* VI.13. Natural virtue is the undeveloped virtue of character that every human being is by nature endowed with. Even a kid, for example, can be said to be brave insofar as they are disposed to have affections similar to those of the fully brave. The distinction between the kid and the fully brave lies in that the latter knows the right way to feel and act so that their bravery does not cause a worse outcome. Thus, it is only when the natural virtue of character is in accordance with and involves the "correct reason"

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[24] See *Catgories* 8, 8b27–9a9; *EN* I.8, 1098b30–1099a2.

prescribed by *phronēsis*, commonly translated as *prudentia* in Latin and "prudence" or "practical wisdom" in English, that it becomes full virtue.[25] Based on this analysis, Leibniz is here using *prudentia* in the Aristotelian sense of practical wisdom, rather than in the Hobbesian sense as the kind of instrumental rationality that calculates what is best for our self-interest.

So far in this section I have shown how Leibniz was first faced with a dilemma between self-interest and public interest when he was trying to define justice, and how he found a way out through the kind of love that is involved in the Aristotelian virtue of friendship. This led him to see that the crux for reconciling self-interest with public interest lies in a virtue of character by which we take others as alter egos. And he consequently defined justice as the virtue of loving others in accordance with practical wisdom. As we will see in section 3, this definition of justice remained more or less stable throughout Leibniz's whole career. But for now, I will first show how Leibniz further adopted Aristotle's virtue ethics (as he understood it) in the last two drafts of *EJN*.

2.3. Vir bonus and ho agathos: the centrality of the virtuous agent

After Leibniz put forward the definition of justice as the virtue of love in accordance with prudence at the end of *EJN₄*, in *EJN₅₋₆* he takes this definition as the starting point and develops his system of natural law from it.[26] The main conclusions in that system are derived as theorems in a system of deontic logic in *EJN₅*. The basis of Leibniz's deontic logic consists in a reduction of deontic modalities to alethic modalities. Before Leibniz, medieval authors used to note the parallel structures of alethic modalities including necessity, possibility, impossibility, and deontic modalities including obligation, permission, prohibition.[27] But Leibniz seems to be the first in history to *reduce* deontic modalities to alethic modalities. This reduction is made possible through the notion of a "good person" (*vir bonus*) who is just in the sense defined by Leibniz: "The good

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[25] An interpretive question is to what extent Aristotelian virtues of character participate in reason. See Lorenz (2009) for an interpretation of virtues of character as themselves involving reason.

[26] "Justice is the disposition of loving all" (*EJN₅*, A VI.1, 465, line 24); "Justice is the disposition of the good person [*viri boni*]" (*EJN₆*, A VI.1, 480, line 16). An apparent difference with the definition in *EJN₄* is that the clause on prudence seems to be dropped. But as I will soon show, this clause is implicit in the notion of the good person.

[27] See Knuuttila (2008, pp. 563–67). Leibniz seems to have developed his deontic logic without any knowledge of this context.

person is whoever that loves all" (A VI.1, 466, line 10). Then, the deontic modalities are defined in the following way:

> The just [*justum*], or permissible [*licitum*] is whatever that is possible for the good person to do.
>
> The unjust, or impermissible is whatever that is impossible for the good person to do.
>
> The equitable [*aequum*], or obligatory [*debitum*] is whatever that is necessary for the good person to do.
>
> The indifferent is whatever that is contingent for the good person to do.
>
> The Roman jurists wisely left the undeterminable cases to the judgement of the good person every now and then. Similarly, Aristotle in the *Ethics* left everything that could not be embraced by rules to the judgement of the prudent, *hōs an ho phronimos horiseie* [as the prudent would define it; cf. *EN* II.6, 1107a1–2]. (*EJN₆*, A VI.1, 480, lines 18–24; cf. *EJN₅*, A VI.1, 465, lines 26–30)

Furthermore, Leibniz posits as an implicit axiom that there actually exists a good person, which is warranted in Leibniz's system since at least God would be such a good person. Based on this implicit axiom, Leibniz derives the theorems that "everything just [*omne justum*] is possible" (A VI.1, 470, line 5) and that "everything obligatory [*omne debitum*] is possible" (A VI.1, 470, line 19). As shown by scholars, what results from this reduction of the deontic modalities to the alethic modalities through the notion of a good person is a deontic logic that is essentially equivalent with the standard deontic logic proposed in the 1950s.[28]

  If I am on the right path by reading Leibniz as adopting an overall Aristotelian framework of virtue ethics, then the notion of *vir bonus* has a straightforward counterpart in Aristotle, namely *ho agathos* ("the good person").[29] For Aristotle, "the good person" is roughly interchangeable with

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[28] This has been noted by Hilpinen (2001) and Lenzen (2005).

[29] There have been no extensive discussions on the origin of the notion of *vir bonus*. Only Hubertus Busche (as far as I know) schematically pointed to the classical Latin sources from Cicero to Quintilian. He also tentatively suggested that the notion corresponds to Aristotle's notion of *ho spoudaios* (see Leibniz, 2003, p. 473) which is commonly translated as "the excellent" or simply "the good" in English and *studiosus* in Latin. This later suggestion

"the virtuous person." Thus, we can call someone a good person when they have some natural virtues of character, and they are fully good when they have the full virtues of character guided by practical wisdom or prudence.[30] Based on Leibniz's comparison between the good person and the prudent (which explicitly cites Aristotle), Leibniz understands the good person as the fully good person. Thus, the Leibnizian good person is someone who has the "disposition of loving all" in accordance with practical wisdom (EJN$_5$, A VI.1, 465, line 23). This love is directed indiscriminately towards all rational beings, because for Leibniz all rational beings are essentially similar to each other and of equal moral status, in other words, they can be alter egos of each other;[31] furthermore, since love is the foundation of natural law which is valid without any commonwealth or societies, there should not be any restriction of its range. The Leibnizian good person, then, is the exemplar of justice insofar as the public interest of the entire humankind perfectly coincides with their self-interest.

Looking back at Leibniz's scheme of reducing the deontic modalities to the alethic, we see that the moral properties of an action ("permissible," "obligatory," etc.) are logically posterior to the notion of the good person since they are defined in terms of it.[32] Furthermore, the definition of the good person only involves the full virtue of justice, i.e., universal love in accordance with practical wisdom, which *prima facie* does not refer to any external state of affairs to be realized or any preexisting obligations. If this is true, then it is the virtue of the agent that explains the moral properties of their action and its end, as well as the validity of moral obligations and permissions, but not the other way round. Furthermore, as the citation of Aristotle shows, Leibniz seems to think

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agrees with my interpretation insofar as *ho agathos* and *ho spoudaios* are equivalent for Aristotle. I chose *ho agathos* as the counterpart of *vir bonus* both because the correspondence is clearer and because the notion of *ho agathos* also figures prominently in Aristotle's discussions of friendship, namely in Aristotle's view that only good people can have complete friendship with each other (e.g., *EN* VIII.3, 1156b7–32; *EN* IX.4).

[30] See *EN* VI.12, 1144a29–1144b1, where Aristotle argues that we cannot be prudent without being good, where goodness is taken to consist in virtues of character. Later in *EN* VI.13, 1144b30–1145a1, Aristotle seems to make a distinction between natural goodness and full goodness parallel to the distinction between natural virtue and full virtue made earlier.

[31] This is different from Aristotle, who thinks that complete friendship only exists among good people who are similar in virtue or moral status (*EN* VIII.3, 1156b7–32). For Leibniz's view on the equality of the moral status of rational beings, see e.g., PW 78. For a treatment of Leibniz's view on slavery in this context, see Jorati (2019).

[32] Zagzebski (2017, p. 196) comes up with a very similar definition moral duty in her exemplarist virtue ethics.

that the primacy of the virtuous agent for understanding and deciding moral issues is an inherent feature of Aristotle's ethics. This puts Leibniz in the same camp with contemporary virtue ethicists who developed their virtue-centered theories based on readings of Aristotle.[33]

To summarize, after Leibniz saw the way out of his dilemma in the virtue of love, he immediately adopted what he took to be Aristotle's ethical framework where the virtuous agent was central. In section 4 I will argue in greater detail that Leibniz did not take the virtuous agent as central only in the context of his deontic logic, rather, the centrality of the virtuous agent stemmed from some essential components of his mature philosophy. But before I get there, I will first provide an overview of the subsequent developments of Leibniz's ethics in his mature career after the late 1670s.

3. Charity of the Wise and the Maximization of Perfection

Unlike other aspects of Leibniz's philosophy, Leibniz's ethics seems to remain quite stable after the decisive moment in *EJN* described above (as I will establish more fully in the rest of the paper). The most noticeable difference between the conception of justice in his later writings and that he reached in *EJN* is that in the later writings, justice is most often defined as "charity of the wise" (*caritas sapientis*).[34] In this section I will clarify the meaning of this expression and explain its connection with Leibniz's metaphysics at large. I will also explain how this new definition of justice could potentially make Leibniz's ethics fundamentally different from Aristotelian virtue ethics. My response will be put forward in section 4.

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[33] See note 2.

[34] For occurrences of the phrase in Leibniz's later writings, see PW 54, 83, 171; for the standard treatment of the expression, see Riley (1996, ch. 4). While Riley rejects the reading Leibniz's ethics as a kind of utilitarianism, his main complaint is that Leibniz's conception of perfection is different from psychological pleasure, and he seems to be inclined towards interpreting Leibniz as a consequentialist in general whose basic ethical principle consists in the maximization of perfection, although he also claims that applying the consequentialist/deontological distinction on Leibniz is anachronistic (Riley, 1996, p. 163). I am sympathetic to Riley's worry with anachronism, but Riley has obviously ignored another major camp in contemporary normative ethics, namely virtue ethics; furthermore, it is not anachronistic to interpret Leibniz as a virtue ethicist because Aristotle's ethics was the common intellectual resource for both Leibniz and contemporary virtue ethicists from which they developed their theories, and their theories are similar in some significant respects. It is thus not an exaggeration to say that Leibniz and the contemporary virtue ethicists are contemporaries.

Leibniz did not leave us any ethical writings during most of his stay in Paris (1672–76), and it seems that he only started thinking seriously about ethics again at the end of his Parisian stay and the beginning of his career in Hanover. In 1677, already relocated to Hanover, Leibniz wrote to J. A. Lasser, a friend in Mainz, to ask for the manuscripts stored at Lasser's place (A I.2, 307). These manuscripts must have included the drafts of *EJN*, since Leibniz quickly produced a series of papers about the same system of deontic logic centered about the *vir bonus* (1678–80/1; A VI.4, 2758–66) and about the conception of justice in general. It is in these papers that Leibniz gradually settled on the definition of justice as charity of the wise. Below are some of the earliest instances of the formulation:

> Justice is the charity of the wise, or [charity] that conforms to the judgement of the good and prudent person [*boni prudentisque viri*]. (1678/79; A VI.4, 2777)

> Justice is the charity of the wise, or charity that conforms to prudence. […] All charity is virtue, but not yet justice unless it comes with prudence, which prevents the exercise of charity towards some people at some time from being harmful as a whole for them, others, or even myself. (1678/79; A VI.4, 2792–93)

From these texts we can see that the definition of justice as charity of the wise appears to be roughly the same as the old one proposed in *EJN₅*, namely the disposition of love regulated by prudence. Furthermore, the notion of *vir bonus* whose judgement serves as the criterion of justice is also preserved.[35] Indeed, *caritas* and *sapientia* could be taken as the synonyms of *amor* and *prudentia* respectively. So Leibniz might be just rehashing his old idea.

Nonetheless, Leibniz's choice of words was not entirely random. Charity is one of the main theological virtues, so perhaps Leibniz was trying to appeal to his Christian readers by using

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[35] For later appearances of *vir bonus*, see, e.g., A VI.4, 2851, 2854, 2857, 2861, 2863, 2890. In these texts the notion of the good person is sometimes restricted to the person who *only* has the disposition or virtue to love all, but not who is at the same time prudent or wise, and sometimes identified with someone who has the *full* virtue of universal love, which only comes about when love is regulated by prudence or wisdom (cf. A VI.4, 2890). I think in *EJN* Leibniz is understanding the good person in the latter sense. The text cited from A VI.4, 2777 seems to be ambiguous between these two senses, depending on how one understands the "and."

"charity" rather than simply "love." And I think there was something more interesting going on with the substitution of prudence (*prudentia*) with wisdom (*sapientia*). *Prudentia* and *sapientia* were consistently used to translate *phronēsis* and *sophia*—practical wisdom and theoretical wisdom—in *EN* VI.[36] For Aristotle *sophia*/*sapientia* is the intellectual virtue through which one grasps universal truths about fundamental reality that cannot be otherwise, and *phronēsis*/*prudentia* the intellectual virtue through which one grasps "the truth, involving reason, concerned with actions about things that are good and bad for a human being" (*EN* VI.5, 1140b4–6). These two intellectual virtues for Aristotle are different in kind insofar as they are concerned with different kinds of objects—*sophia* with the objects that cannot be otherwise, *phronēsis* the objects that can change.

Once we have this context in mind, it appears that by using *sapientia* in the definition of justice Leibniz is signaling that for him the kind of intellectual virtue that guides charity is of the same kind with the theoretical wisdom by which we know eternal truths about being in general. This is supported by the following chain of definitions:

> Wisdom is the science of felicity [*scientia foelicitatis*]. […] Felicity is a state of lasting pleasure [*laetitiae*]. Pleasure is an affection [*affectus*] of the soul that arises from the opinion of some perfection; if this opinion is true, then a lasting pleasure arises. Therefore, whatever helps to augment and conserve perfection conduces to felicity. (A VI.4, 134)[37]

Wisdom is in the end the science of the nature and causes of perfection. Perfection, as has been widely recognized, is for Leibniz a general property of being—it could be taken as the "magnitude of positive reality as such" (AG 218), or variety compensated by simplicity, or the order or harmony among beings.[38] Thus, every possible state of affairs would in itself have a degree of

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[36] See, e.g., the translations of Robert Grosseteste (Aristotle 1973, p. 480), John Argyropoulos (Aristotle 1560, f104 r.); also see Jakob Thomasius's summary of *EN* (Thomasius 1658, p. 26).

[37] Similar texts are easy to find. For example, in two texts written around 1695, these definitions appear almost unchanged (VE 1301, 1302; Riley translated VE 1301 under the title "Felicity" in PW 83–84).

[38] It is an important question how these characterizations of perfection are related to each other. It is likely that Leibniz tended to identify them, but it is difficult to spell out how. See Rutherford (1995, pp. 22–45) for a treatment

perfection which can be calculated and known by the wise person. If the wise person is also charitable, then they would act to realize the state of affairs that has the highest degree of perfection, where everyone, including the wise person themselves, would end up being the happiest. Charity of the wise would mean that, first, the person is able to know which subsequent state of affairs is the most perfect, and second, the person would act in order to bring about that state of affairs.[39]

Now we see why Leibniz has been widely interpreted to be a consequentialist.[40] For Leibniz every state of affairs has an objective degree of perfection, and it seems that it is the degree of perfection of the consequence of an action that explains the moral property of the action. And the virtues of the agent, i.e., charity and wisdom, seem to consist in the ability to recognize the best consequence and act accordingly. In other words, Leibniz's account of virtues and the virtuous agent seems to be the *virtue theory* that is explanatorily posterior to the most fundamental consequentialist principle of the maximization of perfection. If this were the case, then Leibniz's ethics would be a kind of consequentialism with a subordinate virtue theory, rather than a kind of full-fledged virtue ethics.

Before I present my full response, a preliminary misgiving is that under the consequentialist interpretation it seems extremely odd that Leibniz would often choose to define justice as charity of the wise and present the principle of the maximization of perfection as a consequence of this definition, since this would be the reverse of the real explanatory order. Of course, this oddity is undecisive by itself, and to reach a satisfactory answer we will have to take a closer look at Leibniz's mature philosophical system.

4. God the Exemplar of Human Beings

In this section I will argue that in Leibniz's mature philosophical system, virtues, rather than consequences, are primary for explaining the moral properties of actions. Furthermore, the divine virtues constitute the most fundamental criterion for evaluating the qualities of other agents.

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of these characterizations. In taking perfection as a property of being Leibniz was also influenced by the long tradition of taking being and goodness as "convertible" with each other, see MacDonald (1991).

[39] Cf. the following text from *Sur la nature de la bonté et de la justice*: "Justice is nothing else than that which conforms to wisdom and goodness joined together: the end of goodness is the greatest good, but to recognize it wisdom is needed, which is nothing else than knowledge of the good" (A IV.10, 19/PW 50).

[40] See note 1.

Therefore, Leibniz's deontic logic in *EJN* faithfully represents the structure of his ethics, and his ethics has always been a kind of virtue ethics ever since he took up the Aristotelian position in that early text.

In the rest of this section, I will take the consequentialist interpretation as the main alternative to the aretaic interpretation and not consider in specific the possibility that it is moral obligations that are primary for explaining the moral properties of actions. Here are three reasons for doing so. First, as we have seen, in Leibniz's deontic logic moral obligations are explicitly defined in terms of the virtuous agent; thus, if virtues are in turn explained by moral obligations, then Leibniz's deontic logic would be built upon a circularity. Second, my arguments for the priority of virtues to consequences in Leibniz could be used against the deontological interpretation as well, e.g., the divine obligation to create the best of all possible world is grounded in divine wisdom plus divine charity, rather than the other way round. Third, the principle of the maximization of perfection (and thus happiness and pleasure), which Leibniz explicitly and consistently endorsed, seems hard to square with most kinds of deontological theories, especially the Kantian variety. Thus, it seems that for Leibniz moral obligations are explanatorily posterior to both virtues and consequences.

4.1. The case of God

Let us start by considering the case of God.[41] For Leibniz God created the best of all possible worlds, and according to the consequentialist interpretation the divine action of creating the best of all possible world would be just *because of* its consequence, namely the greatest possible perfection of the created world. However, if the consequence here is taken to be the *actual* consequence of divine creation, then this interpretation would violate one of Leibniz's fundamental commitments, namely "God is the first reason of things": it is God that explains the existence of the contingent world with all of its constituents and properties, rather than the other way round.[42]

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[41] For the sake of simplicity I only focus on the divine action of creation, since divine conservation and concurrence after creation are roughly of the same nature with creation.

[42] *Theodicy* §7 (H 127–28), *Monadology* §§38–39 (AG 218). Also see, e.g., *Theodicy* §388: "The production or action whereby God produces, is anterior by nature to the existence of the creature that is produced" (H 357). Leibniz also often talks about the emanation of the perfection of created things from God (e.g., *Causa Dei* §10, GP VI, 440).

One might object that Leibniz sometimes uses the Biblical reference that after the creation of the world God "considered what he had done, and found it good" to support his view of divine justice (A IV.10, 9/PW 46), and this seems to imply that it is the actual consequence of divine action that explains its moral property. But it is important to note that Leibniz realizes that the story of creation in the Bible is only "a human way of speaking which seems to be used explicitly to show that the goodness of the actions and productions of God do not depend on his will, but on their nature" (ibid.). Thus, the Biblical reference is only meant to bolster Leibniz's case against voluntarism— the view that justice depends on the arbitrary will of the sovereign—and not to show that the moral property of the divine creative action is explained by its actual consequence.

Furthermore, *per impossibile*, let us imagine that God were perfectly wise, perfectly charitable, but not perfectly powerful.[43] Under this imaginary scenario, let us further imagine that the divine creative action fails to bring about the best of all possible worlds and instead brings about a worse world, even though God knows what the most perfect world looks like in its every detail and earnestly wills to bring it about. If so, would Leibniz take such an action to be unjust? The answer seems to be no:

> Thus wisdom is in the understanding and goodness in the will. And justice, as a consequence, is in both. Power is a different matter, but if it is used it makes right become fact, and makes what ought to be also really exist. (A IV.10, 19/PW 50)

When an action conforms to perfect wisdom and charity or goodness, yet lacks perfect power, it would still be perfectly just—its defect consists only in that it cannot transmit its moral property onto its product.

Therefore, the moral property of the divine creative action is prior to the moral property of the created world, and the consequentialist interpretation of divine justice cannot be right if the consequence is taken to be the actual consequence. The other option, then, is to take the consequence as *intended* consequence. Under this interpretation, the moral property of the divine

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[43] This is not an entirely meaningless thought experiment, since for Leibniz the divine intellect, will, and power stand for the three Persons of the Trinity (A VI.2, 287). Thus, there is a sense in which these three faculties are distinct.

creative action is explained by the fact that the consequence intended by the action is the best overall consequence, even though it may not actually come into being.

This modified version of the consequentialist interpretation runs into a similar difficulty, however, because the intended consequence insofar as it is an unactualized state of affairs is an essence[44] that is contained in and ontologically depends on the divine understanding. This is a doctrine that is well-entrenched in Leibniz's writings throughout his mature years:[45]

Neither those essences nor the so-called eternal truths pertaining to them are fictitious; rather, they exist in a certain region of ideas, so to speak, in God himself, the source of every essence and of the existence of the rest. (*On the Ultimate Origin of Things*, AG 151–52)

Its [God's] understanding is the source of essences, and its will is the origin of existences. (*Theodicy*, §7, H 128)

Since the divine understanding is the *source* of all essences, including the intended, unactualized consequence of the divine creative action, it is because the divine understanding is perfect (i.e., God is perfectly wise) that the intended consequence has its nature and properties—including the moral property of being the best among all possible consequences. Divine wisdom consists first of in having all the primitive concepts in which all the primitive identical truths ("A=A") are grounded, and second in being able to exhaust all the possible combinations of these primitive concepts, including the combinations that involve infinite primitive concepts.[46] The latter aspect of divine wisdom in particular can illustrate why the properties of the intended consequence are posterior to divine wisdom. According to Leibniz, the best of all possible worlds is infinitely complex, thus its essence involves infinite primitive concepts. But according to Leibniz's infinite analysis theory of contingency, the properties of such an essence, including its goodness, would be contingent since it cannot be demonstrated in finite steps that the essence has such-and-such

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[44] More precisely, the aggregate of all essences of individual substances that constitute a possible world.

[45] For a balanced treatment of Leibniz's thesis that possibilities are grounded in divine ideas, see Newlands (2013).

[46] For a treatment of Leibniz's "combinatorial approach to possibility" and its relationship with divine understanding, see Nachtomy (2007, ch.1).

properties. It is only because God is perfectly wise who "alone goes through an infinite series in one act of the mind" (AG 28) that he grasps the goodness of the intended consequence, which *thereby* has the property of being the best among all possible consequences.[47]

Even if one finds Leibniz's infinite analysis theory of contingency troubling, my general point stands with or without it: divine understanding is prior, both ontologically and explanatorily, to the intended consequence of his action. Therefore, the moral property of God's action depends more directly on the qualities of God as an agent (e.g., wisdom) than the moral property of the intended consequence of the action. Indeed, since the qualities of God as an agent are what constitutes his nature as the *ens perfectissimum*, there is nothing else that further explains these qualities. In other words, the divine virtues are primary for explaining the moral property of his action.

Leibniz's emphasis on divine charity also becomes understandable once we realize that at least in the case of God (I will turn to human beings in a moment), the moral property of his action is primarily explained by his qualities as an agent. An explanation of the goodness of the divine action would be insufficient if it only appeals to divine wisdom, since a wise agent could well commit wrongdoings. One might object that the goodness of the divine action is sufficiently explained by the fact that it agrees with the best of all possible states of affairs grounded in the divine understanding, so divine wisdom alone would suffice after all. But it is important to note that in this explanation, what is invoked is not only divine wisdom, but also the agreement between divine action and divine wisdom. If this agreement relation is taken to be primitive, then the explanation would violate the requirement that the moral property of divine action should be explained *primarily* by the qualities of God as an agent. The solution, then, would be to explain the agreement between divine action and divine wisdom by another divine virtue, namely divine charity. This is essentially Leibniz's view when he says:

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[47] For a classical treatment of Leibniz's view that it is contingent which possible world is the best in connection with the infinite analysis theory of contingency, see Adams (1994, pp. 22–30). While Adams tends to be skeptical about the success of the theory, there is abundant textual evidence that Leibniz took it seriously throughout his mature years. Carriero (1993, 1995) attempts to reconcile the infinite analysis theory of contingency with the *per se* possibility theory of contingency by arguing that the decree of the divine will is also involved in God's infinite analysis of contingent truths. This is compatible with my overall interpretation that divine virtues, whether wisdom or charity, are prior to the moral properties of the intended consequence of divine creation.

Justice is nothing else than that which conforms to wisdom and goodness joined together: the end of goodness is the greatest good, but to recognize it wisdom is needed, which is nothing else that knowledge of the good. Goodness is simply the inclination to do good to everyone, and to arrest evil, at least when it is not necessary for a greater good or to arrest a greater evil. Thus wisdom is in the understanding and goodness in the will. (*Sur la nature de la bonté et de la justice*, A IV.10, 19/PW 50)

Divine wisdom gives God the complete knowledge of the degree of perfection of every possible state of affairs, and divine charity (which is here called "goodness") has the effect that divine action agrees with the best of all possible states of affairs. Together these two divine virtues sufficiently explain the goodness of divine action, while nothing else explains these two divine virtues.

In the case of God, therefore, virtues are primary for explaining the moral property of his action. Now let us see whether the same conclusion can be established with respect to finite human beings.

4.2. The case of human beings

When we turn to human beings, it might seem at first glance that the difficulties faced by the consequentialist interpretation in the case of God are softened. The consequences of our actions seem to be independent from us,[48] and their degrees of perfection are not grounded in our qualities as agents. However, applying the consequentialist interpretation to the realm of created substances would give rise to certain extremely unpalatable implications.

Since for Leibniz the current world is the best of all possible worlds, the actual consequence of *every* action would be the best possible consequence, hence every action would be trivially just if its moral property is explained by the degree of perfection of its actual consequence. Resorting to intended consequence would not help much either. Suppose you have an intention to harm others, and your intention gives rise to an action which results in the harming of others exactly as you intended. Then according to the doctrine that the current world is the best world, the intended

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[48] The consequences of our actions are understood at the phenomenal level, and I pass over the minute details of Leibniz's complicated theory of causation in the context of the spontaneity of substances.

consequence of your action would be the best possible consequence, hence your action would be just as well. In other words, every effective intention would be a just intention, and so is every action that results from an effective intention.

Given these bizarre implications, there is reason to think that Leibniz might not be thinking about the moral properties of human actions in a consequentialist spirit. Indeed, when talking about the justice of human beings, Leibniz's thinking seems to be predominantly informed by the doctrine of the imitation of God (*imitatio Dei*). Leibniz, following a long theological and philosophical tradition, takes humans to be finite "images of God" (*imagines Dei*) who share in the infinite perfections of God, and the fundamental moral enterprise for humans is to imitate God as far as possible:[49]

> In the science of law, rather, it is best to derive human justice, as from a spring, from the divine, to make it complete. Surely the idea of the just, no less than that of the true and the good, relates to God, and above all to God, who is the measure of all things. (*Opinions on the Principles of Pufendorf*, PW 69)

> But what will one say, if I show that this same motive has a place in truly virtuous and generous people, whose supreme function [*degré*] is to imitate divinity, in so far as human nature is capable of it? (*Sur la notion commune de la justice*, A IV.10, 37/PW 57–58)

Thus although everything that happens in the current world is automatically the best, there is a standard by which human actions can be said to be more or less just: the more the qualities of the agent approach the divine virtues of wisdom and charity, the more just the actions of the agent are; conversely, the further the qualities of the agent deviate from the divine virtues, the more unjust their actions are. Hence the moral evaluation of an agent and their actions depends primarily on the extent to which the agent imitates God. Here one might propose a difficulty that is similar with

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[49] The importance of the doctrine of *imitatio Dei* has been emphasized by Riley (1996, pp. 63–64, 128–29) and Youpa (2016). But again, neither Riley nor Youpa has pointed out the relevance of Leibniz's commitment to the *imitatio Dei* doctrine within his general aretaic framework of ethics. For discussions of the background and wider significance of Leibniz's doctrines of *imago Dei* and *imitatio Dei*, especially as they relate to Leibniz's philosophical system at large, see Tillman (2010), Tillman and Borland (2011).

the one faced by the consequentialist interpretation, namely, given the optimality of the current world, the qualities that any agent has are their best possible qualities, therefore it seems that every action of every agent is just in virtue of the optimality of the qualities of the agent. However, this last inference is a non sequitur. According to the principle that the moral properties of actions are proportional to the qualities of the agent, an agent could act unjustly even though their qualities are the best possible ones that they could have, because these qualities could still deviate more or less from their divine exemplars. Therefore, the current interpretation does not face the difficulty of the consequentialist interpretation.[50]

The notion of imitation is central to Leibniz's practical philosophy as a whole. Just as the fundamental moral endeavor of human beings consists in the imitation of God, human beings fail to do so often by imitating the wrong example:

> Practice is the touchstone of faith. And it is not only what many people practice themselves, but what they make God practice, which betrays them. They depict him ais limited in his views, deranging and refashioning his own work at every moment, attached to trifles, formalistic, capricious, without pity with respect to some, and without justice toward others, gratifying himself groundlessly, punishing without measure, indifferent to virtue, showing his greatness through evil, impotent with respect to the good and willing it only half-heartedly, using an arbitrary power, and using it inappropriately; finally weak, unreasonable, malignant, and in a word such as they would show themselves when they have the power or when they think about having it: for they imitate only too much the idol which they adore. (*True Piety,* cited from Riley, 1996, 192)

Human beings fail to be just because they fail to imitate the true God and imitate a false idol that has the qualities opposite to God's virtues. In order to ensure that everyone has the right exemplar to imitate, Leibniz thinks that political leaders should strive to exemplify the divine virtues as far as possible so that their subjects could have a more observable exemplar to imitate:

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[50] An apparent difficulty it faces is that, given no human beings could ever fully instantiate the divine virtues, no human beings could ever be fully just. I think this is a consequence that Leibniz is willing to accept, and it does not pose any significant obstacle to his view since humans could still be just to different degrees.

Nobility is a great motive for cultivating these excellent natural qualities; for, without saying that the propensities of fathers, beings as if imprinted in the blood, are often passed on to children, it is certain that people guide themselves by example, which can often have a greater effect on their minds than reason, and that inclination brings them to imitate domestic sooner than foreign examples: such that nobility, being nothing else than a succession of illustrious people in a single family, excites [people] to virtue by the force of the examples which it puts forward. (*Portrait of the Prince*, PW 91)

Furthermore, Leibniz seems to think that, since the human intellect is infinitely inferior to the divine intellect, it is easier for human beings to imitate divine charity rather than divine wisdom. In *Portrait of the Prince*, which is a handbook for the moral education of the prince with tangible Aristotelian overtones, Leibniz claims that it suffices for the prince to possess knowledge that is "most useful for action and for government" (PW 92), and the intellectual virtue of the prince becomes "prudence" understood as practical wisdom (PW 94–95). Thus the exemplary function of the prince seems to consist mainly in their virtues of character.

To conclude, Leibniz's thinking about human justice is again centered around virtues and the virtuous agent. Furthermore, here the consequentialist principle of the maximization of perfection is not only explanatorily posterior but also likely false.

4.3. Leibniz the virtue ethicist

So far I have argued that in Leibniz's mature ethics the divine virtues are explanatorily primary for understanding the moral properties of divine actions, and human actions are just to the extent that the agents imitate God, the perfectly virtuous agent. When we compare this theory to Leibniz's Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics and deontic logical system in *EJN*, we can see that their central idea remains the same, namely the virtuous agent, whether the *vir bonus* or God, is the explanatory basis from which all other moral evaluations are derived. Leibniz's later ethics develops the *EJN* mainly in two respects: first, in his later writings practical wisdom is transformed into theoretical wisdom; second, the notion of imitation is later introduced to explain how we can evaluate other

agents based on the perfectly virtuous agent.[51] None of these developments affects the primacy of virtues in Leibniz's ethics; indeed, the second development even further corroborates the centrality of the virtuous agent.

Based on these considerations, it seems appropriate to call Leibniz a virtue ethicist insofar as virtues are primary in his moral theory. Indeed, there are significant commonalities between Leibniz's virtue ethics and some versions of contemporary virtue ethics. For example, in what is called the "divine motivation theory," Linda Zagzebski argues that moral property of an action depends on that of its motivation; furthermore, we have no criteria for identifying a good motivation before identifying an exemplar of goodness. This exemplar of goodness is an agent who has the virtue or disposition to issue good motivations, who is ultimately God in Zagzebski's theory. Thus, the fundamental moral endeavor of human beings consists in the imitation of God and the divine motivations, and human actions are good to the extent that the agent succeeds in this endeavor.[52] Zagzebski's divine motivation theory is strikingly similar to Leibniz's ethics as I just described. Both accept God as the ultimate virtuous agent on which all moral evaluations are to be derived, and both stress the importance of the imitation of God. There is even a sense in which Leibniz's ethics is motivation-based. For Leibniz the motivation of an action would be the "consequent will" from which an action immediately follows, and Leibniz does accept that the goodness or badness of the action is explained by that of the consequent will.[53] The main difference between Leibniz and Zagzebski is that for Leibniz the quality of the motivation, or the consequent will, is again explained by those of the will and the intellect, e.g., charity and wisdom, while for Zagzebski the quality of the motivation is primary. Despite this difference, there is significant common ground between the two philosophers. This, I think, should not come as a surprise since

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[51] It is hard to say exactly when Leibniz introduced the notion of imitation. At any rate, this notion, understood as the imitation of the virtuous agent, is not present in *EJN* and the Parisian writings, so it is safe to say that the introduction of the notion is a later development.

[52] See Zagzebski (2004). For a more succinct account, see Zagzebski (1998).

[53] The consequent will results from the interactions of antecedent wills. Each antecedent will is inclined toward a particular good depicted in the intellect, and the consequent will is inclined towards the greatest good and results in an action. While this doctrine is most fully discussed in the *Theodicy* (§22, H 136–37), it is already foreshadowed in *EJN* (A VI.1, 480).

both are influenced by an Aristotle-inspired framework of ethics where virtues are taken to be primary, and both are theists who take God as the ultimate reason for everything.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have argued that, first, the young Leibniz resorted to an Aristotle-inspired virtue ethics when faced with a dilemma between egoism and altruism, and second, his mature ethics remained faithful to the central idea of that virtue ethics, namely virtues and the virtuous agent are explanatory primary in the moral realm. Thus, Leibniz's ethics is a kind of virtue ethics.

But why did Leibniz find his virtue-based theory appealing? One of the reasons, as I pointed out in section 2, is that Leibniz found the way out of his dilemma through the Aristotelian virtue of friendship. And there are other reasons as well. First, the virtue-based theory fits well with Leibniz's theism. As explained above, for Leibniz God is the ultimate reason for everything, therefore, everything should be explained through the qualities of God. Insofar as the virtue-based theory derives every moral property from divine wisdom and divine charity, it accomplishes this task perfectly. Second, the virtue-based theory provides a general framework in which all the diverse strands of ethical thought that Leibniz found partly correct could be accommodated. Hobbesian egoism and Epicurean hedonism are accommodated insofar as virtuous actions—the actions that follow from charity and wisdom—are inherently pleasing and conduce to our true self-interest; the Christian idea of universal love becomes the paramount virtue of character, namely charity; the Platonic view that the Good is transcendent, eternal, and the source of all beings is accommodated insofar as the divine intellect contains all possible state of affairs with their degrees of perfection and the divine will realizes the best among them. That an ethical framework could accommodate so many different views must be for the eclectic Leibniz an important indication of its truth.[54]

List of Abbreviations

A   *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Leibniz 1923–). Reference is to series, volume, and page.

AG   *Philosophical Essays* (Leibniz 1989). Reference is to page.

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GP   *Die Philosophische Schriften von Leibniz* (Leibniz 1875–90). Reference is to volume and page.
H   *Theodicy* (Leibniz 1985). Reference is to page.
L   *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Leibniz 1976). Reference is to page.
PW   *Leibniz: Political Writings* (Leibniz 1972). Reference is to page.
VE   The online *Vorausedition* of volume 5, series 6 of (Leibniz 1923–). https://www.uni-muenster.de/Leibniz/bd_6_5_2014.html

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