

## 'Human Nature and Cultural Diversity in Enlightenment Political Thought'

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Doctrines based on conceptions of a universal human nature have been criticized for their Eurocentric and even imperialist biases. The postcolonial critique of 'human nature' follows the work of Edward Said, who depicted modern western discourses as intertwined with projects of imperialism over the non-western Other (see Said 2003). The theoretical framework of Said's account of British and French discourses on the Orient (i.e., the Arab world) has been extended to European and North American encounters with the entire non-western world, including during the Enlightenment period (Festa & Carey 2009). Furthermore, current work on the history of race has characterised discourses of 'humanity' as racially inflected (e.g., Da Silva 2007). Justin Smith's (2015) recent book on early modern philosophical approaches to the concept of race identifies a 'racial essentialism' or 'one-race model...of human diversity' in which 'all human beings are held up to the ideal of the white man, and non-white men and women are seen as mere approximations of this ideal' (p. 26). Taken together, postcolonial and post-racial theories assert that the early modern to modern ideas of a universal human essence or nature have in fact grounded cultural and racial hierarchies which privilege white, European societies over others. Western civilisation, then, is distinguished from and superior to backwards peoples and societies, as it embodies the ideal of the 'human'. This false universalism underlies the dichotomy of 'the West' versus 'the rest', a common phrase in the War on Terror and part of the title of Niall Ferguson's (2012) polemic (which outlines the west's six 'killer apps' enabling its rightful global dominance).

Megan Thomas (2010) has discussed how the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism and imperialist discourse provides an impetus for comparative political theory, and how the influence of Said's work 'is clear in the way comparative political theorists often articulate concerns about Eurocentrism, essentialism, and the relationship between power and knowledge' (p. 654). That is to say, by examining non-western texts, thinkers, and traditions in their own lights and in relation to western political thought, comparative political theorists seek to overcome the parochialism of western political theory in its overriding focus on a Eurocentric canon. Against the objection that comparative theory, as Fred Dallmayr (2004) puts it, 'promotes parochial "identity politics," thus betraying the idea of universalism and the aspirations to universality inherent in modernity', Dallmayr counters:

...one could argue that cross-cultural comparative theorists are genuine, even better, universalists, based on a simple question: *Who* is universal, or *whose* conception of universalism is really universal? Those who claim to be universal monopolize universalism; by this very claim, they necessarily exclude all others from their monopoly, and thereby undermine the very idea of universalism. (p. 253; emphasis in original)

The question I will tackle here concerns the extent to which supposedly universalistic conceptions of human nature in western political thought exclude non-western perspectives and thus fail to account for cultural diversity. European Enlightenment thought is particularly singled out for its imposition of universalist norms which are associated with western modernity. Indeed, Dallmayr (2004) suggests that ‘comparative theorizing in many ways re-opens the old battle between the ancients and the moderns, a battle which curiously intersects with the difference between East and West’ (p. 254). In other words, to engage in cross-cultural study is to challenge western modernity, including the ‘universalist claims of the European Enlightenment’ (Dallmayr 2004, p. 249). In response, the most vigorous polemicist on behalf of Enlightenment thought, Jonathan Israel, has defended radical Enlightenment ideals of freedom, equality, and secularism as rightly applicable to all human beings, as recoverable from cultural traditions other than that of the west, and as the best defences against imperialism and colonialism (Israel 2006, p. 869).

In this paper, I want to complicate such accounts, focusing particularly on the political thought of two prominent figures in the early European Enlightenment: Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). Bayle and Leibniz, I argue, adhered to conceptions of human nature and yet displayed an appreciation of cultural diversity especially in their engagements with Chinese culture and thought. I have previously written on moral universalism and cultural particularity in early Enlightenment thought on China, particularly in *China in Early Enlightenment Political Thought* (Kow 2017; see also Kow 2014), but here I focus specifically on their accounts of human nature in relation to the Confucian tradition. Bayle’s account of the universality of human passions, which is both influenced by and radically develops the thought of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), depicts human nature in a fashion which may be compared to that of the Confucianism of Mencius and his interpreters, and grounds his enthusiasm for Chinese society and government. Leibniz, while generally adhering to a traditional notion of human essence, conceived of the rational soul in such a way as to justify his project of cultural exchange with China and Confucianism. Thus, a brief comparative, cross-cultural study of aspects of Confucianism and the thought of Bayle and Leibniz reveals that dialogical engagements with the non-western world predate contemporary efforts either to criticise western modernity or to defend its universalist norms, and are not wholly absent from early modern thought.

## Confucianism on human nature

Confucianism, of course, refers not to a single doctrine explicated by Confucius, but rather a complex body of literati and popular teachings over millennia which has constituted a cultural foundation for China and other societies in East and Southeast Asia. Roger Ames (2010) posits that ‘a porous yet enduring Confucianism thus understood predates the historical figure of Confucius himself’, especially since Confucius saw himself as a ‘cultural transmitter rather than innovator’ (p. 67). There is, in consequence, no single Confucian conception of human nature as such. Confucius’s own disciple lamented in the *Analects* 5.13 that ‘one does not get to hear the Master expounding upon the subjects of human nature [*xing*] or the Way of Heaven’ (eds Ivanhoe & van Norden, 2005).

Later Confucians, however, explored the *xing* or natural disposition of human beings, beginning with the classical Confucian thinkers Mencius (Mengzi) and Xunzi. Mencius (ca. 372-ca. 289 BCE), who would come to be regarded as the most important Confucian thinker after

Confucius, famously asserted that human beings qua human naturally feel pity and compassion at the suffering of others, such as when witnessing a child falling into a well. Such natural compassion is the ‘sprout of humaneness [*ren*]’, while our other natural dispositions to feel shame or modesty, as well as an innate sense of right and wrong, are the ‘sprouts’ of the other Confucian virtues. All human beings have these sprouts, and it is imperative especially of rulers to recognise and cultivate them, so that they may govern virtuously and act as moral exemplars to the people (Mencius 2009, pp. 6-9, 35-36). As with, e.g., Hume, Rousseau, and Smith, Mencius thought that human beings possessed innate feelings for others which in turn are the basis for social and political virtues when properly cultivated. This conception, along with insights from Daoist and Buddhist teachings, formed the basis of later, neo-Confucian conceptions of the ‘heart-mind’, both the physical organ and seat of virtue at the core of our ethical selves (e.g., Zhu 1999, pp. 704-5; Wang 2009, pp. 137-39; see Berger 2015).

Scholars of Confucianism caution that such accounts are not to be mistaken for essentialist doctrines of human nature. Kwong-Loi Shun (1997), for example, defines *xing* in Mencius’s thought as ‘certain characteristic features of human beings that are particularly conspicuous, pervasive, and difficult to alter, without necessarily having the connotation of what is essential as opposed to what is accidental’ (p. 185). Hence ‘natural dispositions’ may be used to translate *xing* rather than ‘human nature’. More generally, Roger Ames (2010) argues following the work of Tang Junyi that *xing* in Confucian thought is constituted by not a single but two ‘human natures’: a ‘first nature’ seated in the ‘heart-mind’ which consists of natural inclinations, dispositions, and conditions; and a ‘second nature’ which is the cultivated self. Ames emphasises that ‘there can be no “first nature” that is not embedded within “second nature” as its initial conditions, and there is no “second nature” that is not grounded in and ultimately the product of a cultivated “first nature”’ (p. 78). In contrast to a foundational human nature which must be liberated, altered, or mastered in some form, Confucian thought has regarded ethical cultivation itself as natural. In this way, human nature is dynamic and plastic, a process of becoming a socially embedded and relational self which is both human and natural at the same time.

## Bayle on human nature & Chinese atheism

With this brief sketch of Mencian views on human nature, we can turn to Enlightenment conceptions of human nature which, while clearly distinct from Confucianism in fundamental ways, are arguably non-essentialist too. Smith’s (2015) study traces the movement from the idea of the human soul as ‘essence’ to reconceptualisations of the human animal within natural taxonomies, and thus to the notion of natural racial differences. My concern in this paper is not with the genesis of the idea of race, but my contention is that there is an intermediate account of human nature between the rational soul and the biological animal as found in the thought of Bayle.

Bayle was a Protestant refugee from France in the relatively more freethinking environment of the Netherlands, and his own religious convictions are the subject of heated debate (see Kow 2017, p. 42, for a brief overview of the myriad interpretations on this point). His arguments for religious toleration are grounded in a defence of the rights of conscience delimited only by considerations of justice and public security (as determined by public reason) (Sparling 2014). They reflect his Calvinist upbringing as well as the influence of early modern natural law on his thought (Labrousse 1963-64). Bayle thus appeared to adhere to a notion of the

human as a rational animal possessed of divine conscience—though also belonging to a particular confessional community and to political society.

In this latter respect, he advanced a more radical conception of human nature than that captured in the traditional idea of the ‘soul’ as the essence of the human. In his 1683 work *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, Bayle sought to decouple human beliefs and behaviour. In a section entitled ‘That Man Does Not Act According to His Principles’, he commented pessimistically on the universality of human passions despite the diversity of cultures:

Whence comes it, I beg you, that although there is among men a prodigious diversity of opinions bearing on the manner of serving God and of living according to the laws of propriety, one nevertheless sees certain passions consistently ruling in all countries and in all ages? Why are ambition, avarice, envy, the desire to avenge oneself, shamelessness, and all the crimes that can satisfy these passions seen everywhere? Why are Jew and Mohammedan, Turk and Moor, Christian and Infidel, Indian and Tartar, the inhabitant of the firm earth and the inhabitant of the isles, nobleman and commoner, all the sorts of people who in other respects have as it were nothing in common except the general notion of man—why are they so similar in regard to these passions that one might say that they copy one another? Whence comes all this, if not from the fact that the true principle of the actions of man (I except those in whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is deployed in all its efficacy) is nothing other than the temperament, the natural inclination toward pleasure, the taste one contracts for certain objects, the desire to please someone, a habit gained in the commerce with one’s friends, or some other disposition that results from the ground of our nature, in whatever country one may be born, and from whatever knowledge our mind may be filled with? (Bayle 1964-82, vol. 3, p. 88; Bayle 2000b, p. 169)

This conception of human nature governed by certain passions amidst the multiplicity of religious, social, and political opinions and customs echoes Thomas Hobbes’s assertion of the ‘similitude of *Passions*, which are the same in all men, *desire, fear, hope, &c*; not the similitude of the *objects* of the *Passions*, which are the things *desired, feared, hoped, &c.*: for these the constitution individuall, and particular education do so vary...’ (Hobbes 1991, p. 10; emphasis in original). For Bayle, as for Hobbes, human beings are everywhere governed by the same passions, though different passions work variously in different persons according to culture and temperament. Hence, while such a depiction of human beings is beholden to the Augustinian stress on human sinfulness, it is also a naturalistic conception (Whelan 1989, p. 188; Robertson 2005, p. 220): for Hobbes, as based on a mechanistic philosophy of human nature; for the sceptic Bayle, as derived from critical historical scholarship and empirical observation of human beings across different societies, cultures, and faiths. Cultural diversity, then, is not irrelevant to understanding human nature, for the passions which govern human beings both influence and are implicitly shaped by social interactions in different contexts. That is to say, ‘the taste...for certain objects, the desire to please someone, a habit gained in the commerce with one’s friends’, etc. are universal human passions, but inflected by what those objects are, what sorts of persons one wishes to please, and the kind of commerce one engages in with one’s friends. In this way, though Baylean human nature contrasts sharply with the moral optimism of the Confucian

account sketched above, his account is arguably closer to a non-essentialist view of natural dispositions in relation to the society of others than it is to a metaphysical human essence.

Moreover, it is upon this conception that Bayle considered the viability of a society of atheists—as empirically confirmed by China itself. For Hobbes, absolute sovereign power over state and church is necessary to check the antisocial passions of human beings. Bayle, while following Hobbes and Bodin in advocating absolutism (see Kow 2017, pp. 67-70), went further in conceiving the passions themselves as regulating social behaviour. Apart from those persons noted above who, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, are true Christians in their heart as well as their actions—though Mori (1999) points out that Bayle does not name a single example of such (pp. 193-96, 204-5)—most human beings profess religious beliefs but act according to their passions (and in turn shape religion to serve their selfish desires). How, then, do societies persist when it is the passions which govern human action? Laws and punishments are always necessary to keep the people in check, but Bayle supposed that decency in action is conceivable in a society of persons who do not profess any belief in God. Acts of charity, fidelity, justice, and so on may be motivated out of a love of praise and the esteem of others, as well as the desire for the assistance of others when necessary (Bayle 1964-82, vol. 3, pp. 109-10; Bayle 2000b, p. 212). This stress on benevolent and just deeds prompted by sociable passions would exert a crucial influence on eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, including that of Mandeville, Hume, Voltaire, and Smith (e.g., see Labrousse 1963-64; Mason 1963; Mandeville 1997; Robertson 2005, chap. 6; Phillipson 2010, p. 166). Thus, Bayle was a formative thinker in developing this fundamental insight in Enlightenment thought: the integrity of civil society without dependence on religious sanction, based on an account of human nature centred on sociable passions.

Although there is a sense in which all societies are atheistic, given the motivation of the passions rather than the pure dictates of religious conscience (Gros 2004, pp. 432-33), China above all for Bayle exemplified the viability of an avowedly atheistic society. Bayle was not the first early modern thinker to suggest that China was atheistic—a view often attributed to François de La Mothe Le Vayer (1642)—but he tended to regard Chinese doctrines as denying an otherworldly deity, whereas La Mothe Le Vayer followed the Jesuit accommodationists in seeing China as pagan and monotheistic (see Kow 2017, pp. 15-30). Thus there are scattered remarks and commentaries across Bayle's opus, including the *Continuation of the Various Thoughts on the Comet* of 1705 and articles in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (first published 1697), concerning the atheistic doctrines of the Confucian literati, the sect of the Buddhists, and society at large, described variously as Spinozist, Stratonist, esoteric, exoteric, and naturalistic (see Kow 2017, pp. 61-67). Indeed, Bayle's uncertainty on the exact nature of Chinese atheism reflected his concern that European knowledge of the language, textual traditions, and beliefs of China's people over its long history was insufficient to provide a definitive account (Bayle 1964-82, vol. 3, pp. 226-29). Nevertheless, the evidence pointed to China's atheism whatever its form. In other words, Bayle's assertion of a universal human nature based on the passions led him to depict China as proof that a rational society of atheists is possible, keeping in mind that the true nature of Chinese atheism is obscured by the difficulties of cross-cultural interpretation. All or virtually all human beings are predominately motivated by natural and social passions, but how these passions act on individuals living in society—and in fact enable sociable behaviour in the absence of divine revelation—will vary according to culture.

## Leibniz on human nature & cultural exchange

Unlike his correspondent Pierre Bayle, G.W. Leibniz stridently opposed Hobbes's materialism, account of human nature, and political views. The contrast especially with Hobbesian justice reveals, however, his idiosyncratic conception of the human soul. In his 1702-3 essay *The Common Concept of Justice*, Leibniz explicitly criticized Hobbes's view (as he saw it) that God's absolute right arises from his omnipotence rather than his adherence to eternal justice (Leibniz 1885, p. 58; Leibniz 1988, p. 47). But Leibniz's concept of justice challenged Hobbes's contractualism as well. In contrast to Hobbes's definition of justice as the performance of covenants, and thus obedience to the laws of the sovereign who alone can enforce the social covenant (Hobbes 1991, pp. 100-1), Leibniz conceptualised justice as a necessary and eternal truth akin to the truths of mathematics (Leibniz 1885, p. 61; Leibniz 1988, p. 49). It is thus prior to any human covenant. Moreover, unlike the Hobbesian contract which sets out the limits to our natural rights, Leibniz saw justice as consisting not merely in the limitations or protections on rights but also in duties to perfect others (Mulvaney 1968, p. 53; Riley 1996, p. 207). Justice obligates charitable acts enlightened by wisdom (Leibniz 1885, p. 71; Leibniz 1988, p. 57).

Such continuity between divine and human justice regards human beings as rational souls within God's system of nature. Justice as wise charity seeks the good for all of God's creatures, namely 'the perfection of intelligent substances.' Thus, the soul, Leibniz argues, must be immortal so that goodness will be rewarded in the next life with happiness (Leibniz 1885, pp. 62-63; Leibniz 1988, pp. 50-51). Human beings are not unique in the universe as rational animals—since for Leibniz there are higher intelligent substances than man, and all souls are embodied—but fundamentally, like all other inhabitants of the universe, they are spiritual substances or 'monads' attached to a body and in a pre-established harmony with all other monads. Furthermore, monads are not static substances but governed by the principle of change and growth (Leibniz 1960-61, vol. 6, pp. 607-22). As Franklin Perkins (2004) has compellingly argued, Leibniz's monadology is linked to cultural diversity and his project of cultural exchange between Europe and China. Each monad has a particular but limited perspective on a common universe. Since monads are embodied, this perspective will be conditioned by proximity with other monads: 'even without interaction, each monad reflects the monads nearest to it more clearly and holds a similar perspective on the rest of the world...[thus] generating similarities within cultures and differences between cultures' (p. 65). Hence, through cultural exchange, distant cultures can learn more about the common universe they inhabit. Leibniz's account of the human, then, posits a metaphysical essence distinct from Bayle's stress on the passions, but allows for the ethical and intellectual perfectibility of individual substances and cultures—akin to Confucian moral optimism concerning the naturalness of personal and social cultivation. As Smith (2015) notes, some authors have even argued that Leibniz's monadic and perspectival metaphysics is compatible with animist ontologies (since non-human animals too possess monads, albeit lower-level than human souls) (pp. 89-90; cf. Leibniz's comments on Chinese animism below), thus linking human beings to the natural world but in a far different form from a shared passionate nature as in Hobbes and Bayle.

Leibniz saw Europe and China as equal partners in a project of cultural exchange between the two poles of the Eurasian continent. In his famous preface to the *Novissima Sinica* ('News from China') of 1697/99, Leibniz praised the Jesuit mission as advancing the interests of humanity. While European culture is superior to that of China in mechanical arts and theoretical knowledge (as demonstrated, in his own mind, by Leibniz's contribution to western learning),

China excels in the areas of ethics and politics: ‘it is difficult,’ he gushed, ‘to describe how beautifully all the laws of the Chinese, in contrast to those of other peoples, are directed to the achievement of public tranquillity and the establishment of social order’ (Leibniz 1923-, ser. 4, vol. 6, p. 396; Leibniz 1994, p. 47). Confucian social and political duties mirror the hierarchy of ‘natural societies’, from family to state to the human race under God, which Leibniz had already conceptualised in 1678—almost two decades before his first significant work on China (see Leibniz 1948, vol. 2, pp. 6002; Leibniz 1988, pp. 77-78; Riley 2006, p. 206). Leibniz therefore credited Confucianism with maintaining social and political harmony throughout the empire, and lauded the Kangxi emperor (r. 1661-1722) as an exemplary monarch (unlike Louis XIV) who combined just and capable rulership with an appreciation of the fruits of Chinese and western learning, especially geometry. Europe has been sending missionaries to teach the Christian religion, but it is imperative that China send missionaries to Europe to teach ethics and politics (Leibniz 1923-, ser. 4, vol. 6, pp. 398-401; Leibniz 1994, pp. 48-50). In this way, Leibniz’s enthusiasm for Chinese morality, society, and government arose from his very conception of an infinite plurality of substances which, in terms of rational monads whose embodied perspectives constitute a diversity of cultures, oblige a project of cultural exchange (though he was far less appreciative of other non-western cultures, particularly in the Islamic world: see Almond 2006).

Unlike Bayle’s depiction of China as a rational society of atheists, Leibniz sought to show that the Chinese possessed a natural theology which is consistent both with Christianity and his own philosophy. In the unfinished *Discourse on the Natural Theology of the Chinese* of 1716, Leibniz presented Confucian and pre-Confucian beliefs as largely sound perspectives on the universe when properly interpreted. For our purposes, it is particularly significant that he interpreted the Chinese belief in a plurality of spirits as corresponding to his monadology. The ancient beliefs in genii who inhabited nature and ‘presided over earthly things’ should be understood in terms of a monotheistic deity manifested ‘through the qualities of individual things, under the names of the Spirits of these things, for the benefit of the popular imagination.’ In this way, the Chinese maintained a ‘grand, unique principle’ underlying ‘the wonders of particular things’ (Leibniz 2002, p. 77; Leibniz 1994, p. 115). Leibniz went beyond merely showing the Chinese to be monotheists: he was convinced that the Chinese notion of heaven (*tian*) corresponded to the ‘celestial hierarchy’ and universal monarchy which he called ‘the City of God.’ The Chinese agreed that the divine monarchy was populated by God, the angels, and the immortal souls of human beings after death, as long as one disregards the atheistic and naturalistic doctrines of the modern Confucian literati denying otherworldly rewards and punishments (Leibniz 2002, pp. 100-1; Leibniz 1994, p. 130)—the basis for much of Bayle’s views of China. This account of Chinese natural theology involved serious distortions of Chinese beliefs to fit them within a Christian and Leibnizian framework, as Perkins (2004) notes (p. 172). Nonetheless, although Leibniz’s views on Chinese thought and culture thus fell short of a genuine cross-cultural engagement free of Eurocentrism or even egocentrism (see Perkins 2004, p. 195), his conception of human beings within an infinite, harmonious monadic system governed by God was at least open to a robust project of cultural exchange. In other words, his account of the human as rational soul included an infinite diversity of individuals and cultures inhabiting a common universe—a divinely just order which, Leibniz hoped, could be mirrored in national and international politics (see Kow 2017, pp. 110-28).

## Conclusion

We have seen, then, two distinct accounts of human nature by early Enlightenment thinkers which recognise the diversity of global cultures—particularly in relation to Confucian thought, society, and government. Furthermore, given the universality of wicked human passions, Bayle was sceptical of justifications for Christian and European imperialism based on cultural superiority, as indicated by his suggestion in the article on ‘Japan’ in the *Dictionary* that the Japanese legitimately persecuted Christianity in their country given the violent history of Christian Europe (Bayle 1820-24, vol. 8, pp. 328-29; Bayle 2000a, p. 132). While Leibniz was less hostile to Christian imperialism and more traditionalist in his adherence to a doctrine of the rational soul, he was nevertheless committed to cultural exchange for the betterment of humankind. Additionally, Smith (2015) argues that Leibniz was unique in his time in accounting for human diversity without resort to a conception of race based on morphological differences, unlike his contemporary, the French natural philosopher and traveller to Persia and India François Bernier (pp. 143-206). Now, as for the later Enlightenment, Sankar Muthu (2003), for example, maintains that Diderot, Kant, and Herder were anti-imperialist thinkers informed by a deep recognition of humanity and cultural difference. But their engagements with Chinese culture were far more superficial and denigrating of China than those of Bayle or Leibniz; and Kant in particular occupies a problematic and much debated position in the history of race theory (given his *On the Different Races of Men* and lectures on *Anthropology*), as well as in later Enlightenment thought on the distinctions between civilised and barbaric peoples (Smith 2015, pp. 241-48). Whatever the shortcomings of Enlightenment conceptions of human nature and humanity by our standards, it is nevertheless inaccurate to characterise these universalistic accounts as wholly exclusionary of cultural diversity and merely Orientalist or imperialistic. As the examples of Bayle and Leibniz show, some Enlightenment thinkers sought to come to grips with the existence of very different cultures from Europe’s while maintaining doctrines of human nature. A cross-cultural perspective on social and political questions need not be decoupled from the notion of a common human identity.

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