

Most of my research activity since 2009, indeed since my PhD dissertation, has been concerned with the foundations of the concept of “right” (*ius*). I have been interested in both its theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the concept has murky origins, yet it is widely taken for granted as having a “natural” basis. But then the notion of “natural” is even murkier, since it can refer to natural human capacities (and there is disagreement over which, e.g., Hobbesian egoism versus Aristotelian social instinct), or it can refer to “pure reason.” Examples of the latter can be found in rationalists such as Leibniz, Spinoza, and Kant, despite differences among them. All of these views ultimately face questions about whether “right” in any of its formulations ultimately depends on a *super*-natural foundation—such as in theological voluntarism, or face questions about God’s role in morality and justice, just in case the foundations of reason remain independent of theology.

What have I come up with? My book, *The Science of Right in Leibniz’s Moral and Political Philosophy*, published in 2013, takes a decidedly rationalist, theologically independent, position on the foundations of right. This is not so much a position that I advocate, but rather a position that I find in Leibniz’s early writings on jurisprudence. These writings are quite interesting, because they reveal an aspect of Leibniz’s moral and political thought that has received scant attention. But I also find his formulations theoretically compelling. His position in sum is this: right is a moral power, which amounts to saying that it is a natural capacity of human beings to reason about ends, ends that are conducive to a eudaemonist social community. This view may be most clearly distinguished by comparing it with Hobbes’, for whom right (*jus natural*) is a natural capacity to do what one wills to preserve oneself. The difference between these two positions lies in the source of *limitation* upon one’s natural capacities. For Hobbes, the limitation largely external: it lies in the individual relinquishing his or her natural right to a sovereign power. Arguably, there is nothing “moral” about this. One “ought” to give up one’s right in the state of nature for reason of practical necessity—to preserve oneself. Once you give up your right, you are then subject to the limitations that the sovereign imposes on your natural right. Only within the social contract do the notions of “obligation” and “morality” have any meaning or foundation.

For Leibniz, however, the case is interestingly different, because he places the foundation of right entirely *within* the individual. This is possible, because the very concept of right, as a moral power, implies a *self-imposed* limitation upon one’s natural power. That is, since right is a moral power, “obligation is a moral necessity.” This means that I do not have the right to do as I will in the state of nature, but rather to do what is right in regard to all rational beings. This means I have freedom to preserve myself, in so far as I do not harm the freedom of another to the same. It means I have rights to basic needs, to property, to form associations and contracts; and it means I have the obligation, even, not merely to refrain from harming others, but to act on their behalf. Moreover, I have these rights and obligations, not out of practical (prudential) necessity, nor out of obligation to a social contract, nor out of the requirements of commodious social living, nor out of a direct obligation to God. Rather, right and obligation are grounded in one’s nature as a rational substance, that is, in one’s capacity for free, deliberative action. It is in this foundation that the rights pertaining to a social contract are legitimized. On this view it is never possible to give over, or to lose, one’s natural right, because it is already present, built-in to our nature. Of course, Hobbes is surely correct to say that such a theoretical foundation will get you nowhere without the force of the sovereign to back it up. But I believe Leibniz’s is right to argue that no social contract, no sovereign’s right, can be legitimized or sustained, without a grounding conception that does not depend on the contingencies of coercive power.

From here, I go on to show how this foundation relates to other conceptions of what is generally called natural law. We can find its roots in Aristotelian justice, in Roman Law, in Christian Theology, and in key modern figures like Grotius, Locke, Pufendorf, and of course Hobbes. I would like to emphasize that my work, centered on Leibniz, is rather unique, since it places Leibniz’s relatively unknown formulations in relation to these mainstream figures. I also make a larger argument about Leibniz’s theoretical and practical philosophy: while Leibniz’s consequentialism is widely acknowledged (the foundation for moral rightness is grounded in God’s conception of the “best possible world,”) I argue that

this conception is grounded in the nature of rational substances, that is, in their capacity for rational self-limitation. On this view, right and obligation do not derive from God's conception of the best possible world, but rather, the conditions of the best possible world derive from the substance's moral-rational nature. I further argue that "free will" for Leibniz turns out to be grounded in the very idea of "moral necessity." This is clearly shown in his mature work (*Theodicy*); however, I show how this mature conception of moral necessity derives from his early writings on jurisprudence, as explained above. Indeed, I show throughout my book how Leibniz's earliest formulations of right and obligation inform his views throughout his philosophical career. This is a quite challenging and original interpretation of Leibniz, but it is well-grounded in the original texts.

I extend and develop these themes in my book and in the four articles I have published. Where shall I go from here? I am recently more interested in contemporary ethics and metaphysics, although as an extension of the themes I have developed so far. I am interested in grounding human rights and moral obligations in our natural capacity for reason and virtue (i.e., dispositional excellence). One advantage of this roughly Kantian-Aristotelian approach is that it challenges two non-cognitivist claims: (1) that moral expressions are not truth-apt and thus not subject to rational evaluation; (2) that since beliefs and desires are distinct essences (as Hume says) moral beliefs are not sufficient motives for action. On the contrary, I argue that moral expressions *are* truth-apt, since one's capacity for reason obliges one to give reasons for one's desires; thus, desires are subject to rational evaluation. Secondly, it is false that beliefs and desires are "distinct essences," since desires can very well be motivated by beliefs. Such belief-based desires are not only subject to rational evaluation, but are sufficient for moral action. Thus, I think that a "capacities" approach that conceives of beliefs and desires as degrees of moral strength, rather than as distinct essences, provides a much stronger moral grounding for our actions and avoids the relativist pitfalls of non-cognitivism.

Another future avenue I am exploring is the problem of free will conceived, again, as a problem about human capacities. I argue for a compatibilist account that conceives of free will as a matter of degrees of knowledge and virtue (dispositional aptitude). It conceives of human agents as determined within broad social and epistemic networks, yet free, not in spite of these networks but because of them. Subjects are free also due to their capacity to reflect on values and goals across temporal dimensions. Most recently, as a result of having taught Philosophy of Mind and read John Heil's work on ontology, I have become aware of how the above account has interesting relations to the metaphysics of dispositions, powers, and capacities. This area of research, sometimes called "Neo-Aristotelianism," treats the physical properties of objects as dispositional powers, and treats events as the mutual manifestation of dispositions, rather than as Humean causes. For example, the dissolution of salt in water is conceived as the manifestation of two "disposition partners," namely salt and water, rather than as the *response* of salt to a water-stimulus, or, simply as an unexplainable conjunction of events. Similarly, human agency may be conceived, not as the power of a will against a set of determining factors, but rather as one disposition among a set of "dispositional partners." Agency then is a function of the mutual manifestation of powers, e.g., mental as well as social and institutional. It also seems to me that a metaphysics of dispositions nicely dovetails with an ethics of virtue and with the conception of "right" as a moral power. I am just beginning to explore these ideas in the work of E.J. Lowe, Brian Ellis, and Stephen Mumford.

The following are selected abstracts of my published work, conference papers, and works in progress. They also provide the best indicator of my research methodology and writing style, which I call historical-analytical.

ABSTRACTS

Published Book

The Science of Right in Leibniz's Moral and Political Philosophy. (Bloomsbury Books, Oct. 2013).



In this book, I argue that the foundation of Leibniz's practical philosophy is deontic, rather than consequentialist. This foundation is laid in his early, and neglected, *Nova Methodus (New Method for Learning and Teaching Jurisprudence, 1667)*, portions of which are translated into English for the first time. In this work Leibniz determines "right and obligation" to be the moral qualities of rational substances and derives the "three degrees of right" that are used throughout his writings on natural law. In the *Elements of Natural Law* (1672), this foundation serves as the prescriptive ground for his account of love and justice. In his middle period (1670's - 90's) I show how this deontic foundation informs several of his unpublished writings, as well as the *Codex Juris Gentium*, and how from it he derives his mature definition of justice as "the love of the wise person." Turning to the early 1700's, and his *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice*, and *Monita, On the Principles of Pufendorf*, I show how the three degrees of right derive his unique version of the Golden Rule. I then show how Leibniz's mature *metaphysical* notions of freedom and necessity, in *Theodicy* and his correspondence with Clarke, depend on his earliest deontic foundations. I then compare Leibniz's practical philosophy with the theories of his contemporaries, Grotius, Locke, and Hobbes. Overall, I provide a textually grounded argument for the centrality of Leibniz's practical philosophy, in relation to his overall metaphysics. Donald Rutherford's review of my book may be found here: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/49352-the-science-of-right-in-leibniz-s-moral-and-political-philosophy/>

"Leibniz, Pufendorf, and the Possibility of Moral Self-Governance," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (July 2012)

In his *On the Duties of Man and Citizen*, 17th century natural law theorist Samuel Pufendorf argues that the source of obligation lies in 'the command of a superior.' This so-called 'voluntarist' position was famously criticized by the 'rationalist' Gottfried Leibniz. However, I wish to highlight several neglected aspects of the debate. Leibniz implicitly proposes a solution to a central moral problem: *how one can be obligated voluntarily*. His answer reflects a sort of motivational internalism, whereby the ideas of justice provide *some* motive cause of action, and virtue provides the rest. In this way the agent acts voluntarily by making the principles of justice the principles of her action. Secondly, I show how this argument for the principles depends implicitly on his 'science of right', established in his earliest writings on jurisprudence. These principles are constituent of the nature of rational substance. It then becomes clear that Leibniz had long developed a foundation for *self-governance*, similar to Kantian autonomy, consisting in the agent's internal moral power to act (*jus*) and moral necessity to act (obligation). These points are exposed through a close reading of Leibniz's criticisms of Pufendorf on the end, object, and efficient cause of natural law.

"Leibniz and the Square: A Deontic Logic for the *Vir Bonus*" (*History and Philosophy of Logic*, May 2014)

17th century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz's contributions to metaphysics, mathematics, and logic are well known. Lesser known is Leibniz's "invention" of deontic logic, and that his invention derives from the alethic logic of the Aristotelian square of opposition. In this paper, I show how Leibniz developed this "logic of duties," which designates actions as "possible, necessary, impossible, and omissible" for a "vir bonus" (good person). I show that for Leibniz, deontic logic can determine whether a given action, e.g., as permitted, is therefore obligatory or prohibited (impossible). Secondly, since the deontic modes are derived from what is possible, necessary, etc., for a good person to do, and that "right and obligation" are the "moral qualities" of a good person, we understand how deontic logic is ultimately

derived from these moral qualities. Finally, I show how Leibniz grounds a central deontic concept, namely *obligation*, in the human capacity for freedom.

Conference Papers

“Moral Therapy in Princess Elisabeth’s Correspondence with Descartes.” Presented at Lehigh University 5th Annual Philosophy Conference, “Women in Early Modern Philosophy,” October 19 – 20, 2017.

Most of the attention given to Princess Elisabeth’s correspondence with Descartes centers on four main issues: the mind-body interaction problem; the passions; Stoic moral virtue; a sort of moral psychology that can be extracted from these accounts. The latter is concerned mainly with the relationship between physiology and psychology, especially with the moderation of the passion and the attainment of the good life (*vita beata*). What has received little attention, however, is the way in which these discussions occur in the midst of Elizabeth’s physical and psychological suffering, that is, the way in which they contribute to a sort of moral therapy. This concern is expressed in Elisabeth’s very first letter, which closes with an appeal to Descartes as “the best doctor for my soul.” This “care of the soul,” I want to argue, constitutes the character and driving force behind Elisabeth’s objections to Descartes’ frequent oversimplification and underestimation of her concerns.

In the Correspondence, Elisabeth frequently mentions the anxieties related to her domestic and political situation. For example, in a letter describing the “bad humor” of her sick brother, Elisabeth expresses skepticism about Descartes’ frequent reminders simply to “turn away” from the anxieties and to orient “reason” toward attaining “true happiness.” Elisabeth wonders where the will gets its strength to turn, in the face of disease, forceful passions, and frightful misfortunes. She suspects that moral strength is a function, not so much of virtue but of moral luck. However, recognition of our vulnerabilities does not make us weak, she claims, but enables us to recognize that the development of moral virtue is contingent and dependent. This development should not be the cause of regret, but a source of strength.

For Descartes, moral therapy is about developing the right habits, about applying one’s reason to practical matters, prudently and in accord with honor. Elisabeth agrees. But her type of moral therapy is grounded in experience, in particular relationships, and in context. Hers is a moral theory that insists on direct connections among mind, body, and context. For someone living at the center of political turmoil, care of the soul is not so straightforward.

“Kant’s Criticism of Leibniz on the Two Sources of Cognition,” presented at the American Philosophical Association conference, Washington DC, January, 2016

Kant claims that Leibniz fails to distinguish two sources of cognition: sensible and intelligible. By characterizing the senses as “confused perceptions” and reducing cognition to intelligible “clarity” only, Leibniz was led to mistake appearances for things in themselves. Commentators have since shown that Leibniz in fact acknowledges and distinguishes the two sources. However, I show that Kant’s criticism is really directed at Leibniz’s failure to recognize that the transcendental categories of experience, namely the a priori intuition of space and the concepts of identity and difference, are subjectively constitutive of experience. So it is this failure, not the failure to distinguish two sources of cognition, that led Leibniz to mistake appearances for things in themselves. This clarifies an important difference between the epistemology of the two philosophers (especially in regard to their respective conceptions of space).

“The Role of Striving and Discord in Kant’s Ideal of Moral Perfection.” Presented at the “Conference on Ideals and the Ideal in Kant.” Bogazici University, Istanbul, Turkey, May 23-26, 2012.

Kant's conception of moral perfection is that of a will whose primary incentive is that of duty. Yet moral perfection demands much more than simply *performance* according to this incentive, since Kant also holds it is our moral duty to develop the internal *disposition*, the virtue, or the constant and steady will, to act from this incentive. Furthermore, not only is the development of this disposition a general end that is also a duty, i.e., a type of self-perfection; but the possession of such a disposed will is an *ideal* that pure practical reason sets before us—as the perfect or “holy will.” Indeed, this ideal leads Kant, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to postulate the immortality of the soul: since moral perfection is impossible to attain in this life, we must postulate its possibility in a continued existence; otherwise, the duty to attain moral perfection would be in conflict with itself, since we cannot rationally strive for an impossible end. With the endless duration of the same rational personality, however, we may hope to make “endless progress” toward that ideal end.

What is too little noticed in this account, however, is that striving and discord are necessary components, not only of moral virtue, but of the very moral worth of an action, for Kant, and thus unavoidable components of this “endless progress,” toward the ideal. In this paper, I wish to show how the postulate of immortality appears much less “necessary” than is typically assumed, since the moral worth of moral of an action does not consist in the *attainment* of its ideal, but rather in the possibility of constant striving.

Article submitted to *Journal for the History of Philosophy* (under review)
“Locke and Leibniz on Moral Doctrine as a Demonstrative Science”

Leibniz's engagement with Locke on innate practical principles in the *Nouveaux Essais* (1704) provides fruitful insight into the possibility of a demonstrative science of morals. I argue that each of their grounds can be divided into two kinds: (1) principles that are sources of activity or *motivation*, namely instincts, such pleasure and pain; (2) principles that are sources of *justification* or normativity of an action, such as those having to do with divine command, justice, and “pure reason.” Making this distinction enables us to clarify Locke and Leibniz's claims for the knowledge and demonstrability of moral doctrine. While it remains difficult to determine exactly *what* principle serves to ground moral doctrine, I show that the endeavor leads Locke into voluntarism, while for Leibniz it leads to the principles of rational jurisprudence, or “the science of right,” which he had established in the early *Nova Methodus*. I also suggest how Leibniz combines the principles of sense and reason in an account of virtue.

Key words: innate principles, demonstrative reason, instinct, jurisprudence

Works in progress

1. Prospectus for *Critical Guide to Leibniz' Discourse on Metaphysics* (under review)

This work will provide a much-needed critical guide to Leibniz's second most famous work, the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. I provide a translation, for the first time based on the Academie Edition as well as a student-friendly analysis and explanation of each section, including the background required to gain a reasonable grasp of the text and its context.

2. Book Prospectus (under construction):

Continuums and capacities: Free will by degrees.

It is typically thought that free will requires that an agent be the cause of one's actions. Furthermore, to be a cause of one's actions one must “be able” to act independently of all prior causes—or, as it is commonly expressed, according to the principle of alternate possibilities (PAP): it must be possible for the agent to act otherwise than he/she in fact did. In this paper, I will argue that PAP misconstrues free-will. The “ability to act otherwise,” cannot consist in acting independently of prior

causes; rather, it consists in the agent's (1) epistemic and (2) dispositional abilities. On this compatibilist view, free will depends on whether the agent possesses the relevant knowledge to act otherwise, as well as on her disposition to act on such knowledge. More exactly, free will is a function of the degree of knowledge and disposition the agent possesses. I will argue that this account of free will is superior to other accounts, largely because it is consistent with a naturalistic metaphysics, if not a scientific worldview.

As many have argued, any account of free will that supposes that a mental event has no prior cause, a so-called “liberty of indifference,” is absurd, since, not only does it leave mental events without causes, but it does not give us the sort of free will we should *want* (as Daniel Dennett puts it). That is, a liberty of indifference does not make us agents, since no cause can be assigned to our actions. At the same time, it is commonly supposed, if every event is “determined” by a prior cause, then no sense can be made of “the agent” being responsible. To avoid both the liberty of indifference and the prison of strong determinism, I propose that the sense of an agent’s “ability” to act must be conceived as consisting of: (1) knowledge of relevant ends and options, and (2) a *relatively fixed* disposition to act according to such knowledge. Thus, the agent must be physically disposed to act according to reasons she cognitively gives herself. These epistemic and dispositional abilities are not, then, independent of prior causes, but rather are constitutive of free willing and acting.

My argument for (1) depends on the fundamental, and ancient, premise that an agent wills deliberately in accord with “the good” she perceives in the action. Thus, an account of a hierarchy of goods will be provided, since the freedom of an agent’s will *will* be a function of how well the agent reasons in view of the greatest good. I will argue for a “relatively objective good,” based broadly on the requirements of human individual, social, and environmental flourishing. Thus, the agent is free, relative to the degree to which she possesses knowledge capable of deliberating effectively in view of the “relatively objective good.” On this account, free willing entails moral willing.

However, while (1) is a necessary condition for agency, it is not sufficient, since an agent may cognitively endorse an action, but fail to perform it (e.g., the *akrates*). Thus, my argument for (2) is that agency requires a “dispositioned self,” sufficient to act—that is, a disposition arising from a studied habit of deliberation, intention, practice, and reform. Free/moral agency does not occur in a single instant or act, nor is it free of inclinations or external, impersonal influences. It is rather determined by the agent's epistemic and dispositional abilities.