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REVELATION AND PROGRESS.
THE CONCEPT OF *PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS*
FROM STEUCO TO LEIBNIZ¹

ABSTRACT: Leibniz's concept of the history of philosophy is that of a *philosophia perennis*: The essential truths of philosophy have always been and will always be in the world and can be found in every philosophical system in history. While Leibniz with *philosophia perennis* takes up a term coined by Agostino Steuco (1497-1548), which stands emblematically for a typical Renaissance topos, he modifies it in a characteristic manner: True philosophy is not, as for the Renaissance authors, revealed by God once and for all in the beginning of the world, but mankind must approach it in a gradual manner. The primordial truths, therefore, are not the ideal form of knowledge, which needs to be preserved, but *semina veritatis*, which need to grow; Leibniz's *philosophia perennis* is thus not a "conservative" conception, but implies eternal progress.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Leibniz versteht die Geschichte der Philosophie als *Philosophia perennis*: Die entscheidenden Wahrheiten der Philosophie waren immer und werden immer in der Welt sein und können in jedem philosophischen System der Geschichte gefunden werden. Während Leibniz mit der *Philosophia perennis* einen von Agostino Steuco (1497-1548) geprägten Begriff aufgreift, der emblematisch für einen typischen Topos der Renaissance steht, modifiziert er das Gemeinte in charakteristischer Weise: Die wahre Philosophie ist ihm zufolge nicht – wie für die Renaissance – ein für alle Mal von Gott offenbart worden; vielmehr muss sich die Menschheit ihr graduell annähern. Die primordialen Wahrheiten sind darum nicht die

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ideale Form des Wissens, die unbedingt zu bewahren ist, sondern *Semina veritatis*, die wachsen können und müssen; Leibnizens *Philosophia perennis* ist insofern keine „konservative“ Konzeption, sondern impliziert ewigen Fortschritt.

KEYWORDS: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz; Agostino Steuco; *philosophia perennis*; *prisca theologia*; Progress; Natural Theology

Leibniz's concept of the history of philosophy, it is universally agreed, is that of a *philosophia perennis*: The essential truths of philosophy have always been and will always be in the world and can be found in every philosophical system in history. The doxographical implications of this conception have often led interpreters to give it a “conservative”² or relativistic³ interpretation: Leibniz's *philosophia perennis* defends certain philosophical tenets already held by the ancients e.g. monotheism or the immortality of the soul; in that sense it denies the superiority of modernity. The popularity of the concept amongst Thomist or broadly Catholic thinkers of the 20th century⁴ has certainly contributed to this interpretation. In this article, I will read *philosophia perennis* not as a doxographical *programme* of theological metaphysics, but rather as a concept of the *history* of this metaphysics: Instead of the content Leibniz saw as “perennial philosophy”, I will focus on the way he thought this content was passed on through history. From this point of view, I will compare Leibniz's conception to his source for the term i.e. Agostino Steuco's 1540 *De perenni philosophia libri X*. While Steuco, a Catholic bishop and papal librarian with Platonist views, does indeed believe that philosophy is the truer the older it is, Leibniz, we will see, gives the concept a characteristic turn such that it no longer warrants its “conservative” classification.

² W. Schmidt-Biggemann, “Leibniz konservativ interpretiert: Der letzte Vertreter der *Philosophia perennis*”, in *Leibniz und Europa*, VI. Internationaler Leibniz-Kongreß unter der Schirmherrschaft des Niedersächsischen Ministerpräsidenten Gerhard Schröder, Vorträge II, Teil, Hannover, 18. bis 23. Juli 1994, Hannover, 1995, p. 265-282; auch in Id., *Apokalypse und Philologie. Wissensgeschichte und Weltentwürfe in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Anja Hallacker and Boris Bayer, Göttingen, 2007, p. 289-299.

³ E. Terzaga, “*Philosophia perennis*. Comentario a la carta a Rémond del 26 de agosto de 1714”, in Q. Racionero (ed.), *G. W. Leibniz: analogia y expresion*, Madrid, 1995, p. 485-492.

⁴ C. B. Schmitt, “Perennial philosophy. From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27, 1966, p. 506.

Steuco, a Renaissance polemicist against Lutheranism, Aristotelianism and university theology,⁵ coined the term *philosophia perennis*, but the concept it refers to is much older.⁶ At its core is the idea that Greek philosophy is rooted in the archaic thought of the East: Appearing first with the ancient legends that Pythagoras and Solon studied in Egypt,⁷ later gaining more importance when early Christian apologists, inspired by the Jewish Platonist Philo of Alexandria, declared Moses the founder of the philosophical tradition,⁸ this tradition became a central paradigm for the interpretation of the history of philosophy in the Early Modern age: The superiority of Pre-Socratic and Oriental thought over classical philosophy was clear for thinkers as important to Leibniz as Francis Bacon, Johann Heinrich Alsted,⁹ and Johann Heinrich Bisterfeld.¹⁰ The popular current of Cabbalism, with which Leibniz himself had to deal,¹¹ also sought to draw perennial wisdom from ancient texts and, since Pico della Mirandola, could be integrated into the *philosophia perennis* narrative. The paradigm suited well the general temper of Early Modern scholarship, which – from

⁵ G. Di Napoli, “Il concetto di ‘*philosophia perennis*’ di Agostino Steuco nel quadro della tematica rinascimentale”, in *Filosofia e cultura in Umbria tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Atti del IV convegno di Studi Umbri, Gubbio, 22-26 maggio 1966, Gubbio/Perugia, 1967, esp. p. 477.

⁶ Cf. Schmitt, “Perennial philosophy”, p. 507-514; R. Widmaier, “Leibniz’ natürliche Theologie und eine ‘gewisse’ *Philosophia perennis*”, in W. Li et al. (eds.), *Für unser Glück oder das Glück anderer*, Vorträge des X. Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses Hannover, 18.-23. Juli 2016, 6 vols., Hildesheim, 2016-2017, p. 586-589.

⁷ Solon’s journey to Egypt is referred to in his own fragments; the legends of Pythagoras have come to us (and to Steuco) in Diogenes Laertius’ and Iamblich’s biographies, which in turn build on older sources that are now lost. For a full account of the sources, cf. von Fritz’s and Aly’s articles in Pauly-Wissowa XLVII / III A, s. v. “Pythagoras”/“Solon”.

⁸ Examples are Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea: Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis*, p. 59.

⁹ T. Leinkauf, “*Prisca scientia* vs. *Prisca sapientia*. Zwei Modelle des Umgangs mit der Tradition am Beispiel des Rückgriffs auf die Vorsokratik im Kontext der frühneuzeitlichen Debatte und der Ausbildung des Kontinuitätsmodells der *Prisca sapientia* bzw. *Philosophia perennis*”, *Mediterranea. International Journal on the Transfer of Knowledge*, 2, 2017, p. 127f., 143.

¹⁰ J. H. Bisterfeld, *Aphorismi Physici*, in Id., *Bisterfeldius Redivivus, seu oper[a] Joh. Henrici Bisterfeldii magni theologi et philosophi posthum[a]*, 2 vols., Den Haag, 1661, vol. I, p. 134.

¹¹ S. Edel, *Die individuelle Substanz bei Böhme und Leibniz, Die Kabbala als tertium comparationis für eine rezeptionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung (Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft, 23)*, Stuttgart, 1995.

Annio da Viterbo's 1498 Berosus forgery until the dawn of the 19th century – saw countless, immensely erudite attempts to blend biblical and classical traditions and new philological or antiquarian discoveries into a single account of sacred world history, often with a special role reserved for the writer's own nation, but always beginning in the East.¹² We still see, in fact, a secularised shadow of this idea when Hegel lets the sun of History wander from East to West.¹³ In the classical Renaissance form of the *philosophia perennis* topos, conceived by Ficino and echoed by Reuchlin, Patrizi, and others, the chronological and epistemological primacy of perennial philosophy coincides with its transcendent origin: The tradition of *philosophia perennis* can be found in the oldest texts and is consonant with reason because its origin is a Divine revelation at the beginning of history. The history of archaic pagan thought, therefore, had to be blended with the Christian revelation narrative of the Old Testament – so that, for example, Moses had to become a predecessor of Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus.¹⁴ All of this we find also in Steuco's narrative.

The origin of the Great Tradition of perennial philosophy, according to Steuco, is to found at the creation already. The first man, he writes, was created with a perfectly beautiful body and an even more beautiful soul, and was endowed with a full knowledge of God and His creation. In these circumstances, of course, Adam and Eve could have talked about nothing but theology all day long!¹⁵ Following the genealogical accounts of the

¹² On Berosus cf. C. B. Krebs, *A Most Dangerous Book. Tacitus's Germania From the Roman Empire to the Third Reich*, New York, 2011, p. 98-104; Schmidt-Biggemann, *Apokalypse und Philologie*, p. 331-356. Several examples of this tradition are presented in the volume K. A. E. Enenkel-K. A. Ottenheim (eds.), *The Quest for an Appropriate Past in Literature, Art and Architecture* (Intersections 60), Leiden, 2018. According to Leibniz himself, mankind (in accordance with the biblical traditions) has its origins in Asia. The Europeans descend from the Skythians; the ancient Saxons (predecessors of the Electorate of Hannover, where Leibniz was employed) were the oldest of these 'Skythian' nations: Bodemann (ed.), *Leibniz' Entwürfe* (1692), 29-31; E. Bodemann (ed.), "Leibniz' Entwürfe zu seinen Annalen von 1691-1692", *Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Niedersachsen*, 1885; Letter 1692, A I.8, 18; cf. W. Conze, *Leibniz als Historiker (Leibniz zu seinem 300. Geburtstag, 1646-1946, Lieferung 6)*, Berlin, 1951, p. 65-73.

¹³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen zur Philosophie der Geschichte*, Stuttgart, 1961, p. 168f.

¹⁴ T. Leinkauf, *Philosophie des Humanismus und der Renaissance*, 2 vols., Hamburg, 2017, II, p. 1227-1238, with a specific characterization of Steuco, p. 1236-1238; cf. Id., "Prisca sapientia", p. 139-143; Id., "Modelle", p. 183-186.

¹⁵ "Omnem enim magni genitoris illius, ac magnae genitricis sermonem, Theologiam fuisse credendum est" – A. Steuco, *De perenni philosophia libri X*, Lyon, 1540, 4.

bible, all of these early men led extremely long lives – Adam, for example, died at the age of 930. Steuco calculated, therefore, that Noah would have been able to meet the grandchildren of the First Parents, who had spent many years with them, had listened to their theological discourses and now had much wisdom to share with the generations that followed.¹⁶ Noah and Abraham’s lives, in turn, even overlapped by 50 years. Thus, much of the knowledge that Adam had at the time of the creation could be handed down via Noah to Abraham and the Israelites, and more generally to the people living in that region of the world where the first humans, both after the creation and the deluge, had settled: Armenia, Mesopotamia, Chaldea.¹⁷ The first philosophical sources surveyed by Steuco are therefore the texts known since Proclus as the *Chaldean Oracles* – attributed, during the Renaissance from Gemistus Pletho onward, to Zoroaster (they are actually from the 2nd/3rd century CE).¹⁸

The rest of the world, uninhabited first and then increasingly settled by the descendants of Noah, was devoid of wisdom and had to import it later from the ‘older’ oriental regions. “Barbarian” theology – says Steuco – is therefore ‘truer’ than Greek and Roman theology, precisely because it is older. The Greeks received their philosophical knowledge from Egypt, which is closer to Chaldea and Mesopotamia than their own country. Even the art of writing, we can read in the *Philebus* and *Phaedrus*, was invented by the “Egyptian man” Theut. What Plato has to say about the divine and the creation, our author is convinced, comes from Hermes Trismegistus. Plato, Solon, Eudoxus and Orpheus himself crossed the sea in order to listen to the wisdom of Egyptian priests; Pythagoras as well, who even adopted the practise of circumcision from them, and who also lived at Mount Carmel in Palestine and visited Arabs and Chaldeans and the *magi* of Persia.¹⁹ Most of this – Steuco is right here – is mentioned in ancient sources. Only one of many examples Steuco cites is Plato’s famous anecdote

¹⁶ Ibid. 4, with reference to *Gen.* 5/11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1-3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 8; cf. Johnston’s article in *Der Neue Pauly* 9, s.v. “Oracula Chaldaica”; M. Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathustra. Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit*, 2 Bde. (*Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 42), Berlin/New York, 1998, p. 35-69.

¹⁹ Steuco, *De perenni philosophia*, 83f.

in which the Egyptian priest exclaims: “O Solon, Solon, you Greeks are always children: there is not such a thing as an old Greek”.²⁰

To be sure, the archaic ‘Chaldean’ tradition, based on the original revelation to Adam, and handed down via Egypt to Greece and Rome, is not the only source of philosophy Steuco acknowledges. The decline of this first philosophical tradition gave way to a second, much weaker, era in human thought, where philosophy was based on the observation of natural phenomena and the inquiry into their causes. Steuco himself – he says – lives in a third era, where new light illuminates the world, “healing the wounds of the first and uncovering the preposterous judgments of the second philosophy”,²¹ and this third one is “the most eminent of them all”:²² The revelation of the Christian era, we are to understand.²³ It is only this full knowledge of the divine wisdom that enables our author to detect vestiges and fragments of truth in the ancient pagan texts that he scrutinizes in his work. But the superiority of Christian thought is possible only due to a new revelation. The second phase of the history of philosophy, based on the autonomous endeavour of the human race to understand the functioning of the world, was subject to many flaws and could never really find truth.²⁴ Revelation thus seems to be the most important and most perfect source of wisdom; if we except the new revelation of the Christian era, therefore, philosophy is in principle the more perfect the older it is. And these are the points, we will shortly see, where Leibniz differs from Steuco.

²⁰ “ὦ Σόλων, Σόλων, Ἕλληγες ἀεὶ παῖδές ἐστε, γέρων δὲ Ἕλληγ οὐκ ἔστιν”: Plat. *Tim.* 22b, trans. W. R. M. Lamb.

²¹ “vulnera prioris illius sanavit: mediae praepostera iudicia retexit” – Steuco, *De perenni philosophia*, 6.

²² Cf. the headline: “De tribus modis, quibus cognita est Sapientia, sed posteriore praestantissimo” – *ibid.*

²³ Cf. S. Álvarez Turienzo, “Révélation, raison et *philosophia perennis*”, *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 64, 1980, p. 339-341. Steuco is very abstract in this chapter and does not mention Christianity explicitly. Di Napoli, “*Philosophia perennis*”, p. 481, understands this third era as the post-Aristotelian Christian Humanism; the decisive date would then be the end of the Middle Ages rather than the beginning of the Christian era. The enthusiastic light imagery and the implication of a new revelation rather speaks against this interpretation; Di Napoli can, however, show that also in a Christian context Aristotelianism is, for Steuco, a prototypical representative of the second rather than the third wave of philosophy.

²⁴ Steuco, *De perenni philosophia*, 3, 6.

Steuco's work is "one of the more prepossessing examples of Renaissance erudition and learning, although at times it tends to be rambling and repetitive":²⁵ On each of the central themes of *philosophia perennis* he "unfurls a carpet of quotations from Plato, Aristotle, Philo, Hermes Trismegistus, the *Chaldaic Oracles*, Amelius, Plotinus and Proclus"²⁶ – a truly encyclopaedic repertory supposedly proving the presence of Christian theology in each of these authors. This achievement enjoyed a modest popularity in the 16th and 17th century; prominent figures such as Francisco Suárez and Daniel Morhof criticized (Suárez) or praised its ideas (Morhof).²⁷ Jacob Thomasius, Leibniz's professor in Leipzig, who emphasizes the role of change and innovation in the history of philosophy²⁸ and is very critical of the idea of simply identifying the thought of the ancients which what we today know to be true, mentions Steuco several times as a well-known example of that problematic tendency.²⁹ The 16th century author Crispo, whom Thomasius cites, can even "tacitly reproach"³⁰ Steuco without naming him: He critically refers to those "qui

²⁵ Schmitt, "Perennial philosophy", p. 517.

²⁶ "der einen Teppich aus Zitaten aus Platon, Aristoteles, Philon, Hermes Trismegistos, den Chaldäischen Orakeln, Amelios, Plotin, Proklos etc. ausbreitet" – Leinkauf, *Philosophie des Humanismus und der Renaissance*, II, p. 1236.

²⁷ Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy", p. 516-517, 524-531; characteristic seems also his eager reception in Salamanca, cf. Álvarez Turienzo, "Révélation", p. 335.

²⁸ Thomasius's programme is the *philosophiae reformatio*, which also becomes a key paradigm of the young Leibniz in his Mainz years: J. Thomasius, *Dissertationes LXIII varii argumenti magnam partem ad historiam philosophicam et ecclesiasticam pertinentes*, ed. C. T. Halle (Saale), 1693, p. 441-443, 473; J. Thomasius, *Exercitatio de Stoica mundi exustione: Cui accesserunt Argumenti Varii, Sed inprimis ad historiam Stoicae Philosophiae facientes*, *Dissertationes XXI*, Leipzig, 1676, p. 20-22, 253; cf. C. Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 101; Ead., "The Seventeenth-Century Debate between the Moderns and the Aristotelians: Leibniz and Philosophia Reformata", in I. Marchlewitz-A. Heinekamp (eds.), *Leibniz' Auseinandersetzung mit Vorgängern und Zeitgenossen (Studia Leibnitiana – Supplementa 27)*, Stuttgart, 1990, p. 18-29; Mercer, *Metaphysics*, 101 and "Leibniz and Philosophia Reformata"; R. Bodeüs, "Leibniz, Jean de Raey et la Physique Reformée", *Studia Leibnitiana*, 23 (1) 1991, p. 103-110. Note the importance of that programme in the two authors, but in my view they over-emphasize its restorative aspects as a renewal of Aristotelianism: As I hope to show elsewhere, *philosophiae reformatio* is as progressive a conception as *philosophia perennis*.

²⁹ Thomasius, *Exercitatio* 20f., 253.

³⁰ "Aug. Steuchum tacite perstringit" – Thomasius's (*Exercitatio*, 20) comment on the quotation following.

de perenni philosophia scripserunt”.³¹ For Leibniz, it seems, Steuco has the same prototypical role: For much of his life, he repeatedly mentions *De philosophia perennis* as a standard reference and supports a planned reprint.³² While his references to Steuco – in contrast to Thomasius’s – are always positive, he gives the Renaissance narrative a decisively progressive turn and, in this way, stays faithful to the evolutionary approach to the history of philosophy he learned from his teacher.

The actual term *philosophia perennis* seems to be a ἄπαξ λεγόμενον in Leibniz’s writings;³³ we find it in a famous letter written from Vienna in August 1714 to the French Platonist Rémond – for whom he was at the time writing the *Monadology*:³⁴

Truth is much more widespread than one thinks, but it is often in disguise, and often also enveloped or even weakened, mutilated, and corrupted by additions that spoil it or make it less useful. By giving attention to these traces of truth among the ancients or (to speak more generally) people of former times, one could drag the gold from the mud, the diamond out of its mine, light from the shadows; and that would indeed be some sort of *perennis philosophia*.³⁵

³¹ Crispo, *De ethnicis philosophis*, fol. 36, quoted after Thomasius, *Exercitatio*, 20 (I cannot find the passage in Crispo’s book).

³² Cf. “*Johannis Bodini Colloquium Heptaplomeres*”, 1668-1669, A VI.2, 137; Ms. 1669-1670 (?), A VI.1, 532; to Arnould, November 1671, A II.1 (2006), 282; “*Rationale fidei catholicae*”, 1685 (?), A VI.4 C, 2307; *Systema theologicum*, 1686 (?), A VI.4 C, 2363; to Foucher, July 1686, A II.2, 217; Ms., 1689, A I.5, 431; to Burnett, 1st February 1697, A I.13, 547; *Theodicy*, 1710, *Disc. Prélim.* 29, G VI, 67. In the 1690s, Leibniz lent his copy of Steuco’s *De perenni philosophia* to the book trader Hoffmann from Celle, who planned a partial reprint of the work: Hoffmann to Leibniz, 31st August 1694, A I.10, 541 f; Chappuzeau to Leibniz, 5th September 1694, A I.10, 554 f; Hoffmann to Leibniz, 19th November 1696, A I.13, 351; cf. G. Utermöhlen, “Die Literatur der Renaissance und des Humanismus in Leibniz’ privater Büchersammlung”, in A. Heinekamp (ed.), *Leibniz et la Renaissance (Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa 23)*, Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 225.

³³ H. J. de Vleeschauer, “Perennis quaedam philosophia. Exégèse et antécédents d’un texte leibnizien”, in *Akten des Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses*, Hannover, 14-19 November 1966, Vol. 1, *Metaphysik – Monadenlehre (Studia Leibnitiana Supplementa 1)*, Wiesbaden, 1968, p. 102.

³⁴ On the chronology cf. E. Pasini, “Cinque storie sulla *Monadologia* di Leibniz”, in B. M. d’Ippolito-A. Montano-F. Piro (eds.), *Monadi e monadologie. Il mondo degli individui tra Bruno, Leibniz e Husserl*, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Salerno, 10-12 giugno 2004, Soveria Mannelli, 2005, p. 147-167; M. R. Antognazza, *Leibniz. An Intellectual Biography*, Cambridge, 2009, p. 498-502.

³⁵ “La vérité est plus répandue qu’on ne pense, mais elle est très souvent fardée, et très souvent aussi enveloppée et même affaiblie, mutilée, corrompue par des additions qui la

The ancient oriental cultures, Leibniz says, made important philosophical discoveries and passed them on to the Greeks; the church fathers adapted these pagan ideas to Christian premises, and the scholastics continued this process – even in *their* barbarian writings, therefore, could be found some *aurum in stercore*, if anybody was interested in searching for it. *Perennis quaedam philosophia*, “some sort of *philosophia perennis*”: Leibniz’s wording, it has been noted, already marks a certain distance from Steuco’s original concept.³⁶

A few weeks before the letter to Rémond, Leibniz talks more amply about the subject: in a lecture presented on the 1st July 1714 to “a certain academy in Vienna”.³⁷ The text doesn’t directly cite Steuco, but has numerous parallels to his ideas. “How much [in theology] do the Greeks owe to the Barbarians, and how much did they themselves add to it?”³⁸ – This is the guiding question of Leibniz’s lecture, which in itself reminds the reader of Steuco’s discourse.³⁹ At the beginning of the lecture, Leibniz briefly mentions how much the Greeks learned from the “Barbarians” in

gâtent ou la rendent moins utile. En faisant remarquer ces traces de la verité dans les anciens ou (pour parler plus generalement) dans les anterieurs, on tiereroit l’or de la boue, le diamant de sa mine, et la lumiere de tenebres; et ce seroit en effect *perennis quaedam Philosophia*”. – to Rémond, 24th August 1714, PG III, 624f.

³⁶ De Vleeschauwer, “Perennis quaedam”, p. 111.

³⁷ “Recitata in Academia quadam Viennae 1. jul 1714”, P. Riley (ed.), “Leibniz, Platonism and Judaism. The 1714 Vienna Lecture on ‘The Greeks as Founders of a Sacred Philosophy’”, in D. Cook (ed.), *Leibniz und das Judentum (Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft 34)*, Wiesbaden, 2008, p. 113. The *academia quaedam* does not seem to be the actual Academy of Sciences, which – projected by Leibniz himself – existed only formally and, in spite of his efforts, could not be brought into being (Antognazza, *Biography*, 494). The lecture was first published by Riley in 1976, cf. P. Riley (ed.), “An Unpublished Lecture by Leibniz on the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 14 (2), 1976, p. 205-216. I follow the critical edition Riley published in 2008, Id., “Vienna Lecture”. For Riley, this text together with the *Monadology* and the *Principles of nature and Grace* forms the “Vienna trinity”, the “definitive statement of his final ‘system’”: P. Riley, “Leibniz’ ‘Monadologie’ 1714-2014”, *The Leibniz Review*, 24, 2014, p. 2.

³⁸ “[...] de Theologia agitur, quaestioque est, quantum in ea debeant Barbaris Graeci, quantum ipsi adiecerint” – “Vienna Lecture”, p. 109.

³⁹ There is indeed a whole chapter dedicated to that question, cf. Steuco, *De perenni philosophia*, 83-85. The original source of the question – cited neither by Leibniz, nor by Steuco – seems to be Diog. Laert. I prol.

other fields of knowledge, beginning, characteristically enough,⁴⁰ with the “Barbarian” origin of their language. After that, he turns to philosophy.

The first step in his argument is a differentiation between Natural and Revealed Theology: “Natural theology is the one that grows from the seeds of truth implanted into minds by God, the creator – just like the other sciences. Revealed theology is the one that is taken from the ancients, to whom God manifested Himself more closely, and that is spread by tradition. Both existed already among the peoples of the East before they reached the Greeks”.⁴¹ This differentiation, opposed though it is to Steuco and the Renaissance tradition of *philosophia perennis*,⁴² was of course by no means invented by Leibniz: It was already clear to Thomas Aquinas and his followers that natural reason was sufficient to know about certain key doctrines of Christianity such as monotheism and the immortality of the soul; faith in a Divine revelation was required only for doctrines referring to the inner essence of God (Trinity) and His contingent decisions (Creation, Incarnation, Eschatology).⁴³ In a certain sense, Leibniz in this point does little more than to restore the scientific sobriety of Scholasticism against the exuberant Renaissance pathos. But this

⁴⁰ On Leibniz’s interest in the history of languages cf. K. D. Dutz, “Lingua adamica nobis certe ignota est”. Die Sprachursprungsdebatte und Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz”, in J. Gessinger-W. von Rahden (eds.), *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1989, vol. 1, p. 204-240.

⁴¹ “Theologia naturalis est, quae ex seminibus veritatis menti a Deo autore inditis enascitur ad caeterarum scientiarum instar. Revelata est quae ab antiquis hausta quibus Deus se manifestaverat familiarius, et traditione propagata est. Utraque apud Orientis populos extitit antequam ad Graecos perveniret” – “Vienna Lecture”, p. 109.

⁴² This gap between reason and faith, even greater in Renaissance Aristotelianism, was one of the things Ficino’s *pia philosophia* wished to overcome: Di Napoli, “Philosophia perennis”, p. 464-472.

⁴³ Cf. J. A. Brent, “Natural Theology”, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://www.iep.utm.edu/theo-nat/>> (retrieved 23rd August 2019); for Aquinas e.g. *Summa theologiae* I, 12.4/12, 12/32.1/46.2, ed. Leon. IV, 120/136/349f./481. In Lutheran theology – whose starting point was Luther’s fierce criticism of philosophy – a similar assessment of the role of reason was not unanimously accepted, but possible (Jacob Schegk, Nicolaus Taurellus), cf. G. Frank, *Die Vernunft des Gottesgedankens. Religionsphilosophische Studien zur frühen Neuzeit (Quaestiones 13)*, Stuttgart, 2003, esp. p. 54-57, 111-119, 142f.; P. Petersen, *Geschichte der aristotelischen Philosophie im protestantischen Deutschland*, Leipzig, 1921, p. 63 and 272. The importance of Natural Theology in Leibniz’s philosophical project is underlined by Widmaier, “Eine ‘gewisse’ *Philosophia perennis*”, p. 582-586. Leibniz cites Thomas Aquinas in this context in *Discours sur la Theologie naturelle des Chinois*, ed. W. Li, Frankfurt am Main, 2002, p. 51.

conventional premise, we will see, leads him not only to a conception of intellectual history totally different from Steuco's, but also to a reassessment of the role of Reason in comparison to Faith unthinkable to traditional Christianity.

Like Steuco, Leibniz now affirms that the doctrine of the immortality of souls was brought by Pythagoras to Greece and Italy from the East – a motive that he mentions in other contexts as well from the 1690s on.⁴⁴ But for him, this does not prove the origin of this tenet in the primordial revelation witnessed by Adam: It belongs to natural, not to revealed, theology, grows out of the *semina veritatis* shared by all the humans, and not only those who had the chance to talk to Methuselah. The revelation of God to Adam, Abraham, and the Hebrews, therefore, is not the only source of philosophy in the world. “I do not want to fight with anyone whether Pythagoras and Plato learned anything from the Hebrews”, he writes to Hansch in 1707 – “until now, I have found nothing that would persuade me of the fact”.⁴⁵ The Augustinian monk Bonjour's 1696 attempt to prove the identity of Hermes Trismegistus with the Hebrew patriarch Joseph does not convince Leibniz: “I have often believed that people are a bit too generous when finding the fables of the ancients in the Holy Scriptures”.⁴⁶ And Pierre Daniel Huet's reading of classical Greek and Roman mythology as a distorted version of Christian revelation⁴⁷ reminds him of “the alchemists, who find the Philosopher's Stone in the Holy Scripture as well as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*”.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ To Fardella, 3rd September 1696, A II.3, 192 f; for Electress Sophia and Duchess Elizabeth Charlotte, October 1696, A I. 13, 47; to Hansch, 25th July 1707, Dutens II, 222-223; to Rémond, 24th August 1714, PG III, 624 f (see above).

⁴⁵ “Utrum ab Hebraeis aliquid didicerint Pythagoras et Plato, cum nemine litigare velim; hactenus, quod id credi suadeat, non animadverti” – to Hansch, 25th July 1707, Dutens II, 222-223, cf. Riley, “Vienna Lecture”, p. 96.

⁴⁶ “j'ay souvent cru, qu'on est un peu trop liberal à tirer les fables des anciens de la Sainte Écriture” – to Spanheim, 27th April 1697, A I.14, 159.

⁴⁷ C. Ligota, “Der apologetische Rahmen der Mythendeutung im Frankreich des 17. Jahrhunderts (P. D. Huet)” in W. Killy (ed.), *Mythographie in der frühen Neuzeit. Ihre Anwendung in den Künsten* (Wolfenbütteler Forschungen 27), Wiesbaden, 1984.

⁴⁸ “Ces Hypotheses [...] me paroissent semblables à celles des Chymistes, qui trouvent la pierre philosophale dans la sainte écriture aussi bien que dans les Metamorphoses d'Ovide” – to Spanheim, 27th April 1697, A I.14, 159, cf. Widmaier, “Eine ‘gewisse’ *philosophia perennis*”, p. 593 n. 50.

In his Vienna Lecture, therefore, Leibniz sees important theological discoveries also amongst peoples that were by no means connected to Old Testament revelation: The immortality of the souls, he reads in Strabo and Cesar, was known also to the ancient Druids and Brahmins, and as Leibniz learns from the more recent Danish scholar Bartholin, the Nordic people with their Valhalla myth also knew about it. Likewise, the belief that the world was created by *one* God is also a central tenet of traditional Chinese philosophy, if one only interprets it correctly. In addition, the Greeks also knew some fragments of the revealed theology, as handed down by the Hebrews: Thales knows – as does the Bible – that water was the first element on the face of the earth; the legend of Prometheus relates how man was created from clay; Greeks and Romans knew about the deluge; the Stoics predicted the world would end in fire. Like Huet and other scholars, Leibniz believes that Jupiter, Neptune, and Pluto, the three sons of Saturnus, can be identified with the biblical three sons of Noah:⁴⁹ Ham dishonoured his father Noah by “seeing his nakedness”,⁵⁰ while Jupiter castrated his father Saturnus. Finally, Pythagoras attributed the number three to God, and thus seems to have known something of the Trinitarian dogma – which at that time could not be known from the sacred texts, but only from the oral tradition of the Hebrews: Here, for a fleeting moment, Leibniz becomes a Kabbalist.⁵¹

Because all the important truths both of Natural and Revealed Theology, therefore, were already contained in Barbarian wisdom, the Greeks didn’t actually have any new tenets to find and, with respect to Revealed Theology, corrupted rather than enhanced what had been handed down to them.⁵² That does not mean, however, that they didn’t contribute anything to the intellectual history of mankind – on the contrary: We owe to them the origin of philosophy as a science.

And even though I doubt that the Greeks found anything actually new in theology, I believe that they expressed several things more distinctly, which the Orientals had

⁴⁹ Cf. S. Waldhoff, “Zwischen Polytheismus und natürlicher Theologie – Leibniz’ Interpretation des antiken Heidentums in seinem Wiener Vortrag von 1714”, *Studia Leibnitiana* 36 (1), 2004, p. 101f.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Gen.* 9, 21-27.

⁵¹ “Vienna Lecture”, p. 109-113.

⁵² Waldhoff, “Polytheismus”, p. 105-107 emphasizes this point.

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handed down to them in a more obscure manner. The most important aspect of this is the doctrine of incorporeal substances. While Moses spoke about God in such a manner that it is sufficiently clear that he had put this supreme being (that said about itself *sum qui sum*, the fountain of essence) beyond all contact to corporeal things – but he did not express such a truth in a scholarly manner, as a dogma. About the souls, as well, the Orientals did not talk in such a way that it was clear that they should be immaterial. For the oriental sages accommodated themselves to popular similes and were content to teach that there was one supreme creator of things, and perfectly just ruler of the souls, and did not philosophize sufficiently about the nature of God and the souls – the Greeks on the other hand, as far as we know, were the first to come forward with some metaphysical philosophy and to deal with the incorporeal substances in God and the other minds in a scholarly manner.⁵³

This, according to Leibniz, was achieved by Pythagoras and Anaxagoras, but most of all by Plato and Aristotle. And though it is probable that none of them added anything genuinely “new” to “Barbarian” thought, they turned what the ancients had expressed through obscure imagery into a scientific system.

Coming to a conclusion, therefore, one must say that we owe to the Barbarians great truths concerning the divine things, to the Greeks, on the other hand, a certain sacred philosophy, which does not only explicate the nature of the divine and spiritual things more expressly, but also demonstrates them with illustrious arguments. In order to instruct mankind – at that time more rough, less cultivated by the doctrines of the several disciplines – through the revelations made to the prophets, God used especially the Hebrew people as an instrument; but afterwards, he established a new light for the human race by pouring a zeal for wisdom into the minds of the Greeks, so that they could shield the divine truths with reliable

⁵³ “Etsi autem dubitem an quicquam plane novum in Theologia invenerint Graeci, puto tamen quaedam ab orientalibus prolata obscurius, a Graecis distinctius fuisse expressa. Potissimum autem horum est doctrina de substantiis incorporalibus. Equidem Moses de Deo ita locutus est, ut satis appareat, Summum illud, quod de se dixit *sum qui sum*, fontem essentiae, ab omni corporis contagio removisse, sed diserte tamen in dogmatis modum, tantam veritatem non expressit. De Animabus etiam orientales ita locuti non sunt, ut immateriales esse constaret. Nempe sapientes in oriente popularibus sese imaginibus accomodabant, contentique docere unum summum rerum autorem, animarumque iustissimum rectorem, de ipsa Dei animaeque natura non satis philosophabantur. At Graeci primi quantum constat quandem Metaphysicam protulere et substantias incorporeas in Deo et Mentibus caeteris diserte agnovere”. – “Vienna Lecture”, p. 113.

demonstrations against all doubts, arising among the humans, who in the course of the centuries were to advance to greater subtilities of thought.⁵⁴

While Leibniz defended the ‘revealed’ aspects of Christian theology throughout his life,⁵⁵ he often somewhat marginalized them;⁵⁶ Christ seems to appear first and foremost as a teacher and lawgiver rather than as the incarnate God and Redeemer.⁵⁷ The Vienna Lecture follows this pattern: Divine revelation, in this text, is only the preliminary means by which God instructs mankind. The primary form of knowledge, which He in the end wants to flourish among men, is that of natural reason i.e. the *semina veritatis* with which every human mind is endowed, and which – first among the Greeks – had to be developed into systematic reasoning. The Greeks, we heard, were the first to speak about metaphysical matters *diserte*: in a methodical, well-structured, scholarly manner. Or, as we read in the letter addressed to Rémond (see above): “The Greeks added reasoning and the form of a science”.⁵⁸ Only this could show in their full glory the truths already discovered by the Barbarians.

Mankind “in the course of the centuries [was] to advance to greater subtilities of thought”, Leibniz says at the end of his lecture, and – just as he saw it in his own time⁵⁹ – was to experience and overcome “doubts” about metaphysical matters born precisely from this progress. Plato and

⁵⁴ “Itaque, ut concludam, dicendum est, Barbaris quidem Veritates maximas circa divina deberi, Graecis autem Philosophiam quandam sacram, qua rerum divinarum et Spiritualium natura non explicatur tantum epressius, sed etiam praeclaris rationibus demonstratur. Ut adeo DEUS pro summa providentia homines adhuc rudiores, minusque disciplinarum praeceptis exultos per prophetarum revelationes erudierit Hebraica imprimis gente usus, tamquam instrumento; sed postea novum lumen generi humano accenderit sapientiae studio Graecorum mentibus infuso, ut divinae veritates contra omnes, hominum ad maiorem cogitandi subtilitatem seculorum progressu provehendorum dubitationes, certis demonstrationibus communierentur”. – *ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁵ M. R. Antognazza, *Leibniz on the Trinity and the Incarnation. Reason and Revelation in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Gerald Parks, New Haven/London, 2007.

⁵⁶ W. Schmidt-Biggemann, “Die Rationalität des Christentums. Leibniz als Theologe”, in Thomas A. C. Reydon-Helmut Heit-Paul Hoyningen-Huene (eds.), *Der universale Leibniz. Denker, Forscher, Erfinder*, Stuttgart, 2009, p. 51-62.

⁵⁷ *Discourse on Metaphysics*, 37, A VI.4 B 1587-1588; *Theodicy, Préface*, G VI, 25-27.

⁵⁸ “les Grecs y ont adjouté le raisonnement et une forme de science”, to Rémond, 24th August 1714, PG III, 625.

⁵⁹ Cf. his ambivalent assessment of his own *seculum philosophicum* in his early letter to Arnauld, A II.1 (2006), 277.

Aristotle, it seems, are not the final point of the development of human intellect. If we now leave the Vienna Lecture and turn to other texts, we will see that the kind of progress that Leibniz imagines beyond the antiquity and, indeed, beyond his own time, consists in precisely what the Greeks themselves had applied to Barbarian thought – that is, more systematic reasoning.

In his own time, Leibniz observed, people with a mathematical mindset were not usually inclined to metaphysics – the lack of clarity in its definitions deterred them. In spite of so many fruitful trials by Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and others, a metaphysical science is now, as it was in the time of Aristotle, ζητουμένη: A desideratum.⁶⁰ The ancients, therefore, did no more than construct an *incunabula veritatis*, a cradle of truth, thus paving the way for further progress within the discipline.⁶¹ “I would like to know who will first give us a metaphysics rendered into a systematic discipline [*in artem redactam*]. For Aristotle collected but the material for it, and his scholastic commentators did not establish a system”.⁶²

In the same way, therefore, that Aristotle and Plato made the first efforts to “build a system” out of the “materials” Pythagoras brought from Egypt, their writings must now in turn serve as the material for a new kind of metaphysics, one whose methodological standards Leibniz wanted to model after the example of mathematics. Thus he frequently suggested that older philosophical texts should be brought into a scientific system, so that the truth they contained would be shown more clearly. A learned clergyman, for example, could do that with the scholastic authors,⁶³ a Platonist with the philosophy of Plato,⁶⁴ everyone according to their personal inclination.⁶⁵ It was in this context that Leibniz welcomed his Roman acquaintance Michelangelo Fardella’s preparations for a book on St. Augustine (he was utterly disappointed with Fardella’s actual result):

⁶⁰ *De Primae Philosophiae Emendatione, et de Notione Substantiae*, 1694, PG IV, 468-70; with reference to Arist. *Met.* I.2, 983 a 21; similarly in 982 a4; b8.

⁶¹ To Fardella, 3rd September 1696, A II.3, 192f.

⁶² “Vellem nosse, quis primus nobis Metaphysicam in artem redactam dederit. Aristoteles enim non nisi materiam comportavit et commentatores eius scholastici nullum systema condiderunt” – to Bierling, 20th June 1712, PG VII, 506.

⁶³ To Fardella, 28th February 1696, A II.3, 536.

⁶⁴ To Rémond, 10th January 1714 / 11th February 1715, PG III 605 / 637.

⁶⁵ To Rémond, 26th August 1714, PG III, 625.

Fardella's text, as he saw it, would serve as an opportunity to promote true philosophy, simply by shaping the thought of the church father into scientific order.⁶⁶

A striking example of how Leibniz imagines such an engagement with ancient philosophy is his treatment of Chinese thought. Emperor Fuxi's supposed invention of the binary numeral system, he writes in the Vienna Lecture, proves that he knew about the creation of the world out of nothing: The number 1 would signify the unity, or God, the number 0 nothing.⁶⁷ The following year Rémond gave Leibniz the opportunity to engage more amply with Chinese philosophy:⁶⁸ He sent him a tract by the Jesuit missionary Niccolò Longobardi († 1655), who had come to the conclusion that Confucianist texts promote a largely materialistic philosophy diametrically opposed to Christian Natural Theology – Longobardi here contradicted both the official policy of his order and Leibniz's conception of *philosophia perennis*. In this context Longobardi, for example, identified the principle Li, the origin of everything in the world, with the “prime matter” of Scholastic terminology. Commenting on the tract, Leibniz now tried to prove that Li was rather to be understood as the “first form” – in whose essence all the created “Entelechies, Souls, Spirits” (we recognize the terminology of the Monadology!) participated and which could therefore safely be identified with the Christian God. The prime matter, on the other hand, should be identified with a second principle, Ki which, according to Leibniz's interpretation of the ancient texts, had been created by Li i.e. God.⁶⁹ Leibniz admits that this interpretation is opposed to that of many Chinese authors – but is it not

⁶⁶ To Fardella, 3rd September 1696, A II.3, 192 f, cf. *ibid.*, LVII-LXI.

⁶⁷ Cf. R. Widmaier, “Die Rolle der Dyadik in Leibniz' Missionstheorie für China” in B. Hoster-D. Kuhlmann-Z. Weselowski (eds.), *Rooted in Hope. China – Religion – Christianity. In der Hoffnung verwurzelt. China – Religion – Christentum (Monumenta Serica Monograph Series LXVIII/1)*, Sankt Augustin, 2017, p. 277-310; Ead., “Die Dyadik in Leibniz' letztem Brief an Nicolas Remond”, *Studia Leibnitiana*, 49 (2), 2017, p. 139-176; Ead., “Natürliche Theologie und Philosophia perennis. Leibniz' Interpretation der alten und modernen chinesischen Philosophie in der Abhandlung Niccolò Longobardis S.J.”, in W. Li et al., *Für unser Glück VI*, p. 781-806.

⁶⁸ W. Li, “Leibniz' *Discours sur la théologie naturelle de chinois*. Entstehung, Editionen und Übersetzungen”, in Id., *Leibniz and the European Encounter with China: 300 Years of “Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois” (Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft 52)*, f. Stuttgart, 2017, p. 17-36; Widmaier, “Longobardi”.

⁶⁹ *Discours sur la Théologie naturelle des Chinois*, ed. Li, p. 47-51.

possible that an erudite European understands the Chinese classics better than the Chinese themselves? Also the ancient Hebrew writings, Leibniz argues, are better understood by the Christians than by the Jews, and often the monuments and history of a nation are best known to foreigners.⁷⁰ Leibniz's strongest argument for his own interpretation are not the enigmatic and fragmentary second-hand quotations from the Chinese classics that he draws from Longobardi's and other Jesuit tracts: His own superior knowledge of the Divine truths, based on the systematic philosophical method only available in the occident, convinces him that his interpretation must be the original and true meaning of the classical texts.⁷¹

How much philosophy were the ancient "barbarians" able to offer to the Greek (and our) world? Leibniz's answer to this guiding question of his 1714 Vienna Lecture is a paradox: The ancient peoples knew everything – and nothing. For those who know to 'read' their ideas properly, the Chinese and the Druids held roughly the right opinions about God and the human soul. But a true philosopher is not someone who has true opinions – he is someone who knows how to find these opinions in a systematic manner and to prove them irrefutably. Only from this superior point of view can one actually 'read' the truths contained in the thought of the ancients. This aim, in Leibniz's opinion, was not attained by the old barbarians, nor was it attained by the Greeks or, indeed, Leibniz's contemporaries (he would not think much differently about the year 2019). Leibniz's suggestion to bring the ancient philosophies into a systematic order is therefore not merely a matter of pedantry or pedagogical convenience: Systematizing the teaching of the *I Ching* or of *De trinitate* means turning opinion into philosophy.

⁷⁰ *De cultu Confucii civili*, A IV.8, 397 f; cf. A. Heinekamp, "Die Rolle der Philosophiegeschichte in Leibniz' Denken" in Id., *Leibniz als Geschichtsforscher*, Symposium des Istituto di Studi Filosofici Enrico Castelli und der Leibniz-Gesellschaft, Ferrara, 12. bis 15. Juni 1980, Wiesbaden, 1982, p. 114-141: 125.

⁷¹ Cf. his emphasis on our *ignorance* (and therefore freedom of interpretation) of Chinese philosophy in his earlier letter to des Bosses, 12th August 1709, G II, 382-83; cf. R. Widmaier (ed.), *Briefe über China (1694-1716): die Korrespondenz mit Barthélemy des Bosses S.J. und anderen Mitgliedern des Ordens*, Hamburg, 2017, p. 116-123; preface to the *Novissima Sinica*, 1697-99, § 9, *ibid.*, 14-17, and Widmaier's introduction *ibid.*, CXXIV-CXXVII. Widmaier also, referring to the Vienna Lecture, emphasizes the revelational source of Leibniz's superior knowledge (*ibid.*, CLXf.); the auxiliary function of revelation in the Vienna Lecture's narrative relativizes this.

For a relational thinker like Leibniz, Hippocrates' *σύμπνοια πάντα*⁷² applies also to the different “modules”⁷³ of his philosophical system: Everything is connected to everything. His conception of the history of philosophy, his ambivalent and dialectical assessment of ancient wisdom, is deeply rooted in his epistemology and metaphysics.⁷⁴ Just like the ancient Barbarians, we all know (in a certain sense) everything already – and yet still we are limited in our knowledge. Each monad, Leibniz famously writes while pondering the Vienna Lecture, is a “perpetual living mirror of the universe”.⁷⁵ Monads, therefore, are not limited “as regards their object, but as regards the different ways in which they have knowledge of their object [...]. In a confused way they all strive after the infinite, the whole; but they are limited and differentiated by the degrees of their distinct perceptions”.⁷⁶ These “degrees of their distinct perceptions” determine what a monad actually *knows*: “a soul can read in itself only that which is there represented distinctly”.⁷⁷ Nobody, therefore, can ever learn anything actually *new*; learning rather means becoming aware of the *petites perceptions*⁷⁸ one has not “distinctly” noticed so far, but that have always been, readable to God, in one’s soul. The progress from *obscure* to *adequate cognition*, the 1684 *Meditationes* argue, is nothing more than a continuous analysis making explicit what the former already implied; “the ideas of

⁷² *Monadology* 61.

⁷³ D. Garber, “Thinking in the Age of the Learned Journal. Leibniz’s Modular Philosophy”, in Li et al., *Für unser Glück* VI, p. 195-204.

⁷⁴ What I am going to say in this and the following two paragraphs has a somewhat controversial presupposition i.e. that there is an essential continuity from the 1680s on in Leibniz’s thought about the matters I am referring to. Obviously, I cannot argue for this view of Leibniz’s philosophy in the framework of this article (for the contrary view, cf. D. Garber, “Leibniz and the Foundations of Physics: the Middle Years”, in K. Okruhlik-J. R. Brown, *The Natural Philosophy of Leibniz*, Dordrecht, 1985; Id., *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad*, Oxford, 2009).

⁷⁵ “un miroir vivant perpetual de l’univers”, *Monadology* 56 (G VI, 616, trans. Latta, p. 248).

⁷⁶ “Ce n’est pas dans l’objet, mais dans la modification de la connaissance de l’objet que les monades sont bornées. Elles vont toutes confusément à l’infini, au tout, mais elles sont limitées et distinguées par les degrés des perceptions distinctes”, *Monadology* 60 (G VI, 617, trans. Latta p. 250).

⁷⁷ “une ame ne peut lire en elle-même que ce qui y est représenté distinctement”, *Monadology* 61 (G VI, 617 trans. Latta, p. 251).

⁷⁸ *Nouveaux Essais, Préf.*, A VI.6, 53-55; *Monadology* 21, G VI, 610.

things [...] are in our mind as the statue of Hercules is in the raw marble”.⁷⁹ If mankind followed Leibniz’s suggestion to dig the “gold” and “diamonds” of true philosophy out of the “mud” of ancient texts, it would do the same thing as any individual learner does when working the “statue” of the idea out of the “marble” of their mind. Perpetual progress in this process is what man is called to – both as an individual and as a species.

Progress thus consists in the rearrangement of knowledge that mankind already has. As a geometrical analogy for this process Leibniz frequently alludes to the spiral: a figure that combines cyclical repetition and eternal progress. Like a spiral, human history often declines in order to ascend again. As in a spiral, individuals, events, and scientific propositions will repeat themselves in history again and again – but they will repeat their circular movement each time on a ‘higher’ level; the universe will grow in perfection each time, in particular with respect to the human intellect. While the logical elements of the knowledge of mankind cannot increase in number and must necessarily repeat themselves, mankind will be able to combine them into ever more complex propositions and thus make ever more sense data subject to rational analysis. Sense data is infinite, and thus this progress will never come to an end: Mankind will never reach perfect truth – but has always possessed all the elements it consists of.⁸⁰

Why is that so? Creatures, in Leibniz’s metaphysics, have a characteristic middle position in the hierarchy of being. Their origin is “God and nothing, the positive and the privative, perfection and imperfection, force and limitation, the active and the passive, form [...] and

⁷⁹ “rerum vero actu a nobis non cogitatarum ideae sunt in mente nostra, ut figura Herculis in rudi marmore”, *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* (1684), A VI.4 A, 591, cf. T. Leinkauf, “Leibniz’ Abhandlung *Meditationes de cognitione, veritate et ideis* von 1684. Eine Diskussion erkenntnistheoretischer Grundprobleme mit Blick auf den *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* des Baruch de Spinoza”, in Id., *Einheit, Natur, Geist. Beiträge zu metaphysischen Grundproblemen im Denken von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, Berlin, 2012, p. 269-289.

⁸⁰ *Demonstrationes de universo* (1700)/*Αποκατάστασις* (1715) in M. Fichant (ed./trans.), *De l’horizon de la doctrine humaine* (1693). *Αποκατάστασις πάντων* (1715), Paris, 1991, 56-61/66-77. Cf. the other manuscripts Michel Fichant assembled in that volume. The spiral with the motto *Inclinata resurget* was one of the symbols of eternal life that Leibniz’s secretary Eckhart ordered to depict on Leibniz’s coffin: Antognazza, *Biography*, p. 545.

matter”.⁸¹ They resemble God – for He is the only principle of being; but they differ from Him by the limits each of them has. If such limits did not exist, the creature would become *actus purus* like God himself, thus a second almighty God – which is impossible.⁸² If, on the other hand, they shared none of God’s predicates, they would have no being at all. They are, therefore, “confusedly omniscient and in a broken way almighty”.⁸³ In the “best of the possible worlds” – what sort of fate can God have envisaged for these ambiguous beings? “Our happiness will never consist, and ought not to consist, in a complete enjoyment, in which there would be nothing left to desire, and which would make our mind dull, but in a perpetual progress to new pleasures and new perfections”⁸⁴ – not even the eternal life after death can be imagined as a static pleasure,⁸⁵ and the universe “always grows in perfection”.⁸⁶ Leibniz’s activities as a statesman, scientist and philosopher can be read as a contribution to this cosmic process, of which *philosophia perennis*, the ever-deeper knowledge about God and the Immaterial Substances, is the keystone.⁸⁷

In spite of all their differences, therefore, Leibniz can subscribe to the opening sentence of Steuco’s work: “As there is one origin of all things, so there has always and amongst all men been the same lore about this

⁸¹ “ex Deo et nihilo, positivo et privativo, perfectione et imperfectione, valore et limitibus, activo et passivo, forma [...] et materia seu mole” – to Schulenburg, 29 March 1698, A II,3, 426s.

⁸² To des Bosses, 16th October 1706, G II, 324.

⁸³ “omniscia confuse et omnipotens refracte”, *Mira de substantia corporea* (1683), A VI.4 B, 1465 s.

⁸⁴ “Ainsi notre bonheur ne consistera jamais, et ne doit point consister dans une pleine jouissance, où il n’y auroit plus rien à desirer, et qui rendroit notre esprit stupide, mais dans un progrès perpetual à de nouveaux plaisirs et de nouvelles perfections” – *Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison* 18, G VI, 606, trans. after M. Morris-G. H. R. Parkinson, *Philosophical Writings*, London, 1984, p. 203f; cf. D. Rutherford, *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 54.

⁸⁵ Several citations cf. W. Hübener, “Leibniz – ein Geschichtsphilosoph?“, in Heinekamp, *Geschichtsforscher*, p. 46.

⁸⁶ Ms., 1694-96 (?), G. Grua, (ed.), *Textes inédits d’après les manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Provinciale de Hanovre*, 2 vols., Paris, 1948, p.95.

⁸⁷ On Leibniz’s “philosophy of history” – fragmentary and partly contradictory, but clear in its outline – cf. J. Elster, *Leibniz et la formation de l’esprit capitaliste*, Paris, 1975, p. 205-238; Hübener, “Geschichtsphilosoph”; A. Seifert, “Neuzeitbewußtsein und Fortschrittsgedanke bei Leibniz” in Heinekamp, *Geschichtsforscher*, p. 172-185.

origin”.⁸⁸ For both Steuco and Leibniz, *philosophia perennis* is of Divine origin, and this origin shapes its historical character. For Steuco, *philosophia perennis* is ever declining (or used to be until the arrival of Christ), because it is the relic of a primordial revelation by the Creator; for Leibniz, *philosophia perennis* is ever growing, because philosophers (like all beings) strive to more and more resemble God, in whose essence all things participate and who “moves” the universe “like something desired” by it.⁸⁹ What humans try to work out of the hard “marble” of their minds, where it is already invisibly enclosed, is nothing else than the “ideas” that God sees; it is God who “implanted the seeds of truth into the minds”. Leibniz’s “light of reason”, even if “natural” and not supernatural, is Divine, for it is a reflex of the “continual flashes of lightning from the Divinity in each moment”.⁹⁰

Leibniz, we have seen, shares a central motive of Steuco’s historiography of philosophy: Greek philosophy has an oriental and ancient origin and arrived in the occident only thanks to the mediation of the Egyptians. The context, however, in which the two authors affirm this idea, is very different. In Leibniz, we do not find Steuco’s “conservative” idea that mankind has always followed the same ideas that we ‘now’ – in the 16th or 17th century – know to be true. What the philosopher from Leipzig has in mind is rather an evolutionist conception of the history of philosophy – a proto-Hegelian one, we might say: Already the most primitive movements of the human mind contain, implicitly, the truth in its entirety – but true philosophy does not consist in these unnoticed *petites perceptions*, but in their development into a scientific system in the

⁸⁸ “Ut unum est omnium rerum principium, sic unam atque eandem de eo scientiam semper apud omnes fuisse” – Steuco, *De perennis philosophia*, 1. Cf. de Vleeschauwer, “Perennis quaedam”, p. 121: “La doctrine chrétienne était *perennis* pour Steuco, parce qu’elle formule sa sagesse éternelle révélée originellement par Dieu ; la métaphysique monadique leibnizienne est *perennis*, parce qu’elle formule l’idée créatrice de l’univers”.

⁸⁹ “moveret sicut desideratum”: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* I.20 after Arist. *Met.* XII 7, A 1072a 26.

⁹⁰ “Fulgurations continues de la Divinité de moment en moment” – *Monadology* 47, G VI, 614. The central role of this and other instances where Leibniz uses the metaphor of light has been noted by H. Busche, “Monade und Licht: die geheime Verbindung von Physik und Metaphysik bei Leibniz”, in C. Bohlmann (ed.), *Lichtgefüge des 17. Jahrhunderts. Rembrandt und Vermeer – Spinoza und Leibniz*, München, 2008, p. 125-162; in my opinion, they need to be read as an analogy in the sense of Plot. *Enn.* V.3.12, 38-47.

course of a historical process: “The true is the whole”; it must “consummat[e] itself through its development”.⁹¹ The philosopher’s task, then, is to let the *semina veritatis* grow into plants – that is: to lead to full light their hidden implications. In this respect, for Leibniz, the historian of philosophy is in the fullest sense of the word a philosopher.

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⁹¹ “Das Wahre ist das Ganze. Das Ganze aber ist nur das durch seine Entwicklung sich vollendende Wesen” – Hegel, *Phänomenologie*, 24 (trans. Miller, p. 11). Similarities to Hegel are also noted by Widmaier, *Briefe über China*, p. CLXVI; D. Mahnke, *Leibnizens Synthese von Universalmathematik und Individualmetaphysik*, Halle (Saale), 1925. Reprint from H. Husserl (ed.), *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 7, 1925, I, p. 307-308 (conception of the history of philosophy) and H. H. Holz, *Weltentwurf und Reflexion. Versuch einer Grundlegung der Dialektik*, Stuttgart/Weimar, 2005, p. 446f.

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