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Discourse on Metaphysics

Few seminal philosophical works are the product of an unoccupied mind in the midst of a failed mining project, but that, it seems, was the story behind Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (hereafter: *Discourse*). At the beginning of January 1686, Leibniz travelled to the Harz mountains to continue his (ultimately ill-fated) project to improve the productivity of the mines there via wind machines and water pumps of his own invention.¹ On 1/11 February 1686, a month or so after arriving, he wrote to Landgrave Ernst von Hesse-Rheinfels (1623-1693) that, "Having been somewhere where I had nothing to do for several days, I have recently written a short discourse on metaphysics" (A II 2, 3/LAC 3),² a remark from which the text subsequently derived its name since Leibniz left it without a title.³ Although Leibniz also left it unpublished, the *Discourse* has come to be considered as one of his key philosophical writings; some claim that it marks the completion of Leibniz's philosophical system,⁴ others that it represents his best attempt at expounding it.⁵ Certainly when considered in the context of his pre-1686 writings, it represents Leibniz's consolidation of a number of philosophical ideas that he had developed and sketched out in the years beforehand in a host of short private essays, fragments, and letters.

Before considering the contents of the *Discourse* it would be helpful to say a little about the text itself. The *Discourse* is an essay approximately 17,400 words in length, which means that, by the standards of the day, it would have been sufficient for a small book, had

¹ For details of the venture, see Wakefield (2010).

² Note that I have often modified the translations cited.

³ Though the first cataloguer of Leibniz's manuscripts, Eduard Bodemann, elected to give it the title "Treatise on the perfections of God"; see Bodemann (1895, 5).

⁴ See for example Belaval (1969, 158).

⁵ See for example Russell (1992, 8).

Leibniz sought to publish it. In the form in which it is presented in both the critical Akademie edition (A VI 4, 1529-1588), and in most recent English translations, the *Discourse* consists of 37 numbered sections, each with its own heading. However, a glance at Leibniz's original draft manuscript (LH I 3 1, Bl. 1-12) reveals that he initially wrote the text as one continuous piece before later adding section numbers and headings, all of which are found on the right hand margins of the page, in square brackets. Curiously, when a fair copy was made of the entire text (LH IV III 7, Bl. 1-18), Leibniz's section numbers were included but his section headings were not.⁶ Given that Leibniz wrote part of the fair copy himself,⁷ it seems reasonable to suppose that the section headings were not intended to form part of the text itself but were added to the draft for a different reason. He certainly found a use for them, for there exists a separate manuscript consisting of the section headings alone (LBr 16 Bl. 46-7), which Leibniz enclosed with his letter to Landgrave Ernst of 1/11 February 1686,⁸ with the request that he pass on the section headings (or "summary of the articles", as Leibniz called them, A II 2, 4/LAC 3) to the renowned philosopher Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) for his consideration.⁹ (This prompted a short-lived but illuminating correspondence between Leibniz and Arnauld over the course of 1686 and 1687, which is examined in the next chapter by Julia Jorati.)

⁶ The original draft is likely to have been written in January 1686. The Akademie editors speculate that work continued on the fair copies until March 1686 (A VI 4, 1530).

⁷ In the fair copy, §§1-2 are in Leibniz's hand, the rest in the hand of an amanuensis.

⁸ The reason for the dual date of the letter is that Germany used the Julian calendar until March 1700, at which time it adopted the Gregorian calendar that had been in use in many other European countries since 1582. Due to the differing methods of calculation, the Julian calendar was ten days (or dates) behind the Gregorian calendar.

⁹ Note that there are some slight differences between the section headings in Leibniz's original draft of the *Discourse* and in the document sent to Landgrave Ernst for Arnauld.

Hence there are three key manuscripts:¹⁰

- (1) Leibniz's original draft, with section headings added
- (2) The fair copy, partially in Leibniz's hand, with Leibniz's corrections, but no section headings
- (3) Leibniz's copy of the section headings

When the *Discourse* was first published in 1846, the editor, Carl Ludwig Grotefend, followed the fair copy of the manuscript (2), printing the section headings (3) as a separate document.¹¹ Subsequent editions, such as that of Gerhardt, followed suit.¹² Then, in 1907, in Henri Lestienne's edition, the *Discourse* was printed with both Leibniz's section numbers and section headings, though the section headings used were drawn not from the original draft of the *Discourse* but from the separate document of headings written for the Landgrave (3). Many English editions of the *Discourse* are likewise hybrids; the editions by Montgomery (1902, 3-63), Loemker (PPL 303-330), Morris and Parkinson (PW 18-47), and Woolhouse and Francks (WFT 53-89) are hybrids consisting of the text of the fair copy (2) and the section headings from (3), while that of Ariew and Garber (AG 35-68) combines the text of the fair copy (2) with the section headings from Leibniz's original draft (1). Only the edition of Martin and Brown (Leibniz 1988) follows the text and section headings from Leibniz's original draft (1), with Leibniz's corrections in the fair copy (2) also marked, and the separate document of section headings (3) printed as an appendix. Those approaching the

¹⁰ There are also two fair copies of parts of the text, one of §§1-17, the other of §§5-7.

¹¹ See Grotefend (1846, 154-93) for the *Discourse* itself, and (1846, 2-5) for the section headings.

¹² See GP IV, 427-463 for the *Discourse* itself, and GP II, 12-14 for the section headings.

Discourse should therefore keep in mind that the various translations available are not all based on the same manuscript or combinations of manuscripts.

What, then, of the text's contents? In his letter to the Landgrave, Leibniz identifies the principal topics of the *Discourse* as "questions about grace, God's concurrence with creatures, the nature of miracles, the cause of sin and the origin of evil, the immortality of the soul, [and] ideas" (A II 3-4/LAC 3). This, as we shall see, is somewhat misleading, as these topics occupy less than a third of the text, which is concerned with many other thorny matters, such as God's choice of the best, the nature of substance, final causes, and the relationship between soul and body. We can fruitfully distil the themes of the *Discourse* down to: God and his choice of the best (§§1-7), substance (§§8-16), physics (§§17-22), and the relationship between God and minds (§§23-37). In what follows, I shall broadly follow each of these themes, outlining their key topics and doctrines, and end by considering what (aside from his having nothing else to do!) prompted Leibniz to write the *Discourse*.

1. God and His Choice of the Best (§§1-7)

The *Discourse* begins with God, who is almost omnipresent throughout the text.¹³ Given the central role God plays in the metaphysical system sketched out in the *Discourse*, it is perhaps surprising that Leibniz makes no effort to prove God's existence; instead, he opts to begin with God's nature. In §1, after defining God as "an absolutely perfect being", who has the supreme degree of power and knowledge, Leibniz claims "Hence it follows that God, who possesses supreme and infinite wisdom, acts in the most perfect way, not only in the metaphysical sense but also morally speaking" (A VI 4, 1531/PPL 303). In saying "it

¹³ God is mentioned explicitly in 29 of the *Discourse*'s 37 sections; those that do not mention God are §§11, 18, 20, 24, 25, 27, 33, and 34, though in some of these Leibniz uses other terms to refer to God, such as "universal cause" (§33).

follows” that God acts in the most perfect way Leibniz does not indicate whether he means it follows *metaphysically*, such that a perfect being must necessarily act in the most perfect way, or whether he has some less strict entailment in mind. This is clarified only in §13, where Leibniz claims that it was God’s “first free decree ... always to do what is most perfect” and that other courses of action were possible for him but were rejected on account of being less attractive (A VI 4, 1548/PPL 311).¹⁴ Having established that God always acts in the most perfect way, Leibniz concludes that “the more enlightened and informed we are about the works of God, the more we shall be disposed to find them excellent and entirely in keeping with everything we could have desired” (A VI 4, 1531/PPL 303-304).

In §§2-3, Leibniz defends the key claim of §1 about the excellence of God’s works against alternative views found in the work of two of the most influential philosophers of the seventeenth century, namely René Descartes (1596-1650) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) (although Leibniz does not here mention them by name, any philosophically-informed reader of the day would have known who his targets were). In §2, he takes issue with Descartes’ claim that God is not subject to external, objective criteria for goodness or beauty but rather lays down the criteria for goodness himself.¹⁵ Leibniz raises two objections to this suggestion, both of which he had rehearsed in a host of anti-Cartesian writings from the

¹⁴ In a text written c.1680-2, Leibniz is clear that, although God chooses freely and without necessity, it is nevertheless the case that he could choose only the best: “even if God does not will something to exist, it is possible for it to exist, since, by its nature, it could exist if God were to will it to exist. ‘But God cannot will it to exist.’ I concede this, yet, such a thing remains possible in its nature, even if it is not possible with respect to the divine will” (AG 21). Such claims recall the old Thomistic distinction between absolute and relative possibility. In Aquinas’ philosophy, a thing or state of affairs can be said to be absolutely possible if it is internally consistent, i.e. involves no contradiction, and relatively possible if some agent or other being could actually bring it about, i.e. supply the means of generation for it. See Aquinas (1993, 244-245).

¹⁵ See Descartes (1984-1991, II: 293-294).

1670s onwards (e.g. A II 1, 787/PPL 273; A VI 4, 1478; A VI 4, 1481). First, he notes that Descartes' position conflicts with the Genesis account of creation in which it is stated that, having created the world, God surveyed what he had done and found or saw that it was good (Gen. 1.31); such phrasing suggested to Leibniz that God had measured his work against an objective standard for goodness rather than had simply stipulated it to be good. Second, he insists that to suppose God chooses the criteria for goodness is to destroy God's glory: "For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the opposite?" (A VI 4, 1532-1533/PPL 304).¹⁶

Having rejected Descartes' position, Leibniz moves on to consider that of "certain moderns" who had argued that, in creating the world, God was able to do better than he in fact had. Leibniz likely has in mind here Malebranche's (1992, 116) claim that "God could, no doubt, make a world more perfect than the one in which we live". Against this, Leibniz points out that "To act with less perfection than one is capable of is to act imperfectly" (A VI 4, 1533-1534/PPL 304), which, unlike Malebranche, he clearly thinks is unworthy of God. Yet it is worth considering what led Malebranche to suppose that God would make an inferior world, as his thought on this influenced Leibniz's thinking about the best world, which he goes on to outline in §§5-6.

When discussing God's choice of world in his *Conversations chrétiennes* [Christian Conversations] (1677), Malebranche had stressed that "the mark of an excellent worker is to produce admirable effects by acting always in the same manner and by the simplest ways" (1677, 25-26/1695, 13, translation modified). This meant that in creating a world God would employ only "a very small number of natural laws to produce a very great number of admirable works" (1677, 73-74/1695, 37). For Malebranche, God's decision to avail himself

¹⁶ The claim is made in other contemporaneous writings, e.g. A VI 4, 1481, as well as many later ones, e.g. GP VI, 219/H 237.

of the simplest ways, and hence of a small number of productive natural laws, meant that a compromise had to be made on the perfection of the world in which these laws were manifested. He argued that to make a more perfect world, for example one without monstrous births (i.e. congenital deformities), it would be necessary for God to establish new laws of motion, but as this would mean abandoning the simplicity of his ways, God would not do it. Consequently, our world is less perfect than it could have been, though Malebranche insisted that God would ensure “his work is as perfect as it can be in relation to the ways he uses to produce it” (1677, 74/1695, 38, translation modified).

Leibniz read the *Christian Conversations* in 1678,¹⁷ and was quickly swayed by its account of the simplicity of God’s ways. In a 1679 letter to Malebranche, Leibniz wrote: “I find very true ... what you say about the simplicity of God’s decrees being the cause of the existence of certain particular evils, since God would otherwise be obliged to change the laws of nature at each moment” (A II 1, 724/PPL 210-211). However, Leibniz did not accept Malebranche’s conclusion that God’s choice of laws would make the world less perfect. Instead, he told Malebranche that

It should also be said that God makes the most things he can, and what obliges him to seek simple laws is to find a place for as many things as are possible to put together; and if he made use of other laws it would be like making a building with round stones, which lose us more space than they occupy (A II 1, 725/PPL 211).

Later in 1679, Leibniz developed the thought in an unpublished text, “Dialogue between Theophile and Polidore”. There he states that

¹⁷ See his extensive notes on it in A II 1, 646–659.

of all the possible ways to make the world, one has to be preferred to all the others – one which causes most things to succeed, and which, so to speak, contains a lot of essence or variety in a small volume; and which, in a word, is the simplest and the richest (A VI 4, 2231/LGR 130).

Accordingly, “the simplest or most beautiful way to make the universe” is the one “through which more things or more perfect things succeed... For the most beautiful and the simplest is that which yields the most with the least difficulty” (A VI 4, 2231/LGR 131, cf. A VI 4, 1395/LC 239). Leibniz here assumes the NeoPlatonic idea that as created things contain a degree of God’s essence or perfection, the more created things in existence the better, as this effectively multiplies God’s own perfections in the world. Leibniz also assumes that it is by favouring simplicity that God is able to bring about the richest set of things.

Many of these ideas reappear in §§5-6 of the *Discourse* when Leibniz considers in what the excellence of God’s work consists. While he construes it in terms of the simplicity of God’s ways and the richness of the effects, the way he explains the relationship between these two criteria is not the same as it was in 1679. In the heading for §5, Leibniz states that “the simplicity of ways is in balance with the richness of effects” (A VI 4 1536/PPL 305), a remark that some scholars have construed to mean that Leibniz took simplicity and richness to be in tension or conflict, such that to create the best world God must seek the optimal trade-off of the two.¹⁸ However, in §6 Leibniz goes on to explain what he means by these two factors being “in balance”, namely that they are simultaneously maximized: “But God has chosen that world which is the most perfect, that is to say, which is at the same time the simplest in its hypotheses and the richest in phenomena” (A VI 4, 1538/PPL 306). Here there is no suggestion, as there was in 1679, that simplicity is the *means* to obtaining richness,

¹⁸ See for example Gale (1976, 81); Rescher (1981, 4); Brown (1987, 197f).

though the thought does occur in later writings (e.g. LM 275, from 1714) so in all likelihood Leibniz had not abandoned it at the time of writing the *Discourse* even if it is not explicitly expressed there.

In this context, another notable omission in the *Discourse* is Leibniz's doctrine of impossibility, which is the idea that not all possible things are compossible, that is, mutually compatible. Its omission is surprising inasmuch as the reader of the *Discourse* may otherwise get the impression that God's decision to produce the richest set of things means that he will create all possible things, which is not a view Leibniz ever held. The *Discourse* does at least contain some hints that this is not his view; for example, in §5 Leibniz states that God is

like a good architect who manages the space and capital intended for a building in the most advantageous way... and a learned author who includes the greatest number of deeds in the smallest possible volume (A VI 4, 1536/PPL 305-306).

The analogies are clearly intended to make the general point that God does the most with the least, but if taken strictly would suggest that he – like the architect and author – is subject to restrictions on what he can include in his creation and as such cannot simply create everything. But one must look to other writings for a more explicit formulation of this thought and the importance Leibniz accords to it in demonstrating that, in creating this world, God must have exercised choice between mutually incompatible alternatives.¹⁹

¹⁹ See for example A VI 4, 1363/SLT 194-195; A II 1, 787/PPL 273. Leibniz is notoriously unclear about what it is that makes some possible things impossible with others. For good discussions on this topic, see Brown and Chiek (2016).

In outlining Leibniz's understanding of the best world we must not forget his claim that God acts in the most perfect way both metaphysically and morally. We now know what is meant by saying that God acts in the most perfect way metaphysically, but what about morally? Leibniz addresses this in §4 of the *Discourse*, in which he states that God "always acts in the most perfect and the most desirable way possible" (A VI 4, 1535/PPL 305). By "most desirable" Leibniz does not mean that God acts so as to keep creatures in a perpetual state of comfort, but rather so that a wise person able to grasp all the detail of God's plan could find no fault with it. Although we cannot grasp the detail, Leibniz thinks that to love God it is sufficient for us to accept the general point that God always acts in the most perfect way, which in effect is to align our will with his. Recalling claims made in *Confessio philosophi* of 1672-3 (see A VI 3, 131/CP 63), Leibniz asserts that those who do not do this, and are in any way dissatisfied with what God does, are effectively "rebels" (A VI 4, 1535/PPL 305).

He is also at pains to insist that being satisfied with what God does doesn't require us to adopt a "forced patience" where we simply wait to see how things unfold, a view he associates both with the ancient Stoics and with Descartes, who had advocated a similar position in the moral code outlined in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637):

My third maxim was to try always to master myself rather than fortune, and change my desires rather than the order of the world. In general I would become accustomed to believing that nothing lies entirely within our power except our thoughts, so that after doing our best in dealing with matters external to us, whatever we fail to achieve is absolutely impossible so far as we are concerned (AT VI, 25/1984-1991, I: 123).

In 1679 Leibniz summarized Descartes' position as an endorsement of "patience without hope" (A II 1, 779/AG 242) and was scathing about such a view, berating Descartes for it in a number of anti-Cartesian texts (see for example A II 1, 777-779/AG 241-242; A II 1, 1482). In contrast, Leibniz urged a Christianized version of Stoicism that combines patience with hope, which requires us to take a different attitude towards the past and future. We should be satisfied with what has already happened, it being clear from the fact that it happened that God willed it that way. But with regard to the future, we should always strive to satisfy what we believe to be God's presumptive will, i.e. we should act in a way we think God would want us to act, by "trying with all our might to contribute to the general good" (A VI 4, 1536/PPL 305). If our attempts do not meet with success we should not suppose that God was working against us, only that on account of other considerations (known to him but not us) he did not will their success at that time.

As part of Leibniz's efforts to establish the perfect way in which God acts, in §§6-7 he considers and stresses the orderliness of God's actions. Important here is his distinction between the "general order", which are the general laws of the universe known to God but not us, and what Leibniz calls its "subordinate maxims", i.e. the natural laws as described by physics (A VI 4, 1538/PPL 306-307). Leibniz informs us that "God does nothing without order" (A VI 4, 1537/PPL 306), which means that everything that happens does so in accordance with the general laws of the universe, which God follows without exception (or as he puts it in a contemporaneous text, "all things are done by God according to certain general laws", A VI 4, 1589).²⁰ What we think of as miracles are merely violations of one of the "subordinate maxims" to the general order, but not of the general order itself, from which God will never depart.

²⁰ English translation available here: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/particularwill.htm>

2. Substance (§§8-16)

Descartes and Malebranche are Leibniz's targets again when he turns to the issue of substance, that is, the fundamental constituent(s) of reality. Arguably the most dominant theory of substance at the time was that advanced by Descartes, who had defined it in terms of independence: "By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence" (1984-1991, I: 210).²¹ According to Descartes, only God answers such a description, as God depends upon nothing else for his existence, but Descartes also recognized a second category, created substance, into which fall those things that depend only upon God in order to exist. Descartes identified two kinds of created substance: mind (or soul) and body, claiming that the essence of mind was thought and that of body extension, that is, being three-dimensional (having length, breadth, and width) (1984-1991, I: 210-211). On this account, human beings were composites of mind and body, a privilege Descartes did not extend to animals on the grounds that their actions could be adequately explained on the supposition that they followed naturally from the arrangements of animals' bodily organs in the same way that a watch's actions followed naturally from the configuration of its component parts. In other words, for Descartes, animals were pure machines, without a spiritual, incorporeal soul (1984-1991, I: 139-141). It is this account of substance, which was also accepted by Malebranche and other Cartesians, that Leibniz seeks to overturn, or at least heavily revise, in the *Discourse*.

In §8, Leibniz raises the issue of substance in a somewhat oblique way, by considering the question of how causation is divided or shared between God and creatures. He claims it is difficult to distinguish God's actions from those of creatures, and this because "there are those who believe that God does everything, while others imagine that he does nothing but conserve the force which he has given to creatures" (A VI 4, 1539-1540/PPL

²¹ This is based upon one of Aristotle's (1984, II: 1625) definitions of substance.

307). By “those who believe that God does everything” Leibniz is thinking of Malebranche and his doctrine of occasionalism, which holds that God is the only true causal agent and that what we take to be everyday cases of causation, such as one object rebounding off another or a soul’s desire being followed by an action, are simply the occasions on which God acts, albeit in accordance with natural laws rather than as ad-hoc interventions (Malebranche 1997, 446-52). And by those who imagine that God “does nothing but conserve the force which he has given to creatures”, Leibniz is most likely thinking of authors such as Ludovico a Dola (1637) and François Bernier (1685), who had upheld this view, and perhaps also Descartes, who had argued that God merely conserves the total quantity of motion in the universe (1984-91, I: 240, 256-257). Rather than examine these suggestions in detail, Leibniz instead asserts that “since actions and passions properly belong to individual substances (*actiones sunt suppositorum*) it will be necessary to explain what such a substance is” (A VI 4, 1540/PPL 307). Any educated 17th century reader would likely have known that the phrase “*actiones sunt suppositorum*” is borrowed from Aquinas (ST 1, Q39 A5 ad1; ST 1, Q40 A1 ad3), who in turn derived it from Aristotle’s (1984, II: 1552) assertion that “actions and productions are all concerned with the individual”.²² Leibniz’s decision to employ the phrase, and to treat it as axiomatic, thus alerts the reader that the account he will go on to give of substance is indebted to the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions.

In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle (1984, II: 1624) had proposed a linguistic criterion for substancehood, claiming that substances are those things which are the ultimate subjects of predication, being the subject of predicates but not the predicate of anything else. So on this account, for example, Plato would qualify as a substance as Plato could not be predicated of anything else, whereas a bruise would not, because it can be predicated of other things, for example Plato (in the proposition “Plato has a bruise”). In §8 of the *Discourse*, Leibniz

²² For more information, see de Libera (2006).

concurs with Aristotle's characterization as far as it goes, stating "it is quite true that when a number of predicates are attributed to a single subject, and this subject is not attributed to any other, it is called individual substance" (A VI 4, 1540/PPL 307). But he insists that Aristotle's characterization does not go far enough, because it does not explain what it means to be truly attributed to a subject. Leibniz then offers his explanation:

it is certain that every true predication has some basis in the nature of things, and when a proposition is not an identity, that is, when the predicate is not explicitly contained in the subject, it must be contained in it virtually (A VI 4, 1540/PPL 307).

For example, in the true proposition "green grass is green", the predicate "green" is explicitly contained in the subject "green grass", which is why the proposition is true. But in a true proposition that is not an identity (that is, where the predicate term is not explicitly contained in the subject term), such as "Alexander conquered Tyre", the predicate "conquered Tyre" is contained in the subject "Alexander" only virtually, that is, its containment is concealed rather than explicit. Nevertheless, Leibniz claims that anyone who had a complete understanding of the subject term would know that the predicate term is contained there. And this is true not just of the predicate "conquered Tyre" but of *every* predicate that is truly ascribed to Alexander, including those about his meals on a particular day, what he said to a friend in a particular conversation etc. This leads Leibniz to conclude that "the nature of an individual substance or complete being, is to have a concept so complete that it is sufficient for the understanding of it and for the deduction of all the predicates of the subject to which the concept is attributed" (A VI 4, 1540/PPL 307). Of course, only God could grasp a

complete concept and know all of the predicates that belong to it,²³ but that does not change the fact that whatever qualifies as an individual substance must have a complete concept. Although Leibniz is not explicit about which things qualify as an individual substance, his paradigm cases are individual people (e.g. Alexander, Plato, you, me), though he also recognizes – not without hesitation, as we shall see – individual bodies or objects; in a deleted passage from §8 he uses the ring of Gyges as an example of the latter, though presumably a non-fictional ring would do just as well (A VI 4, 1540-1541). All such things thus have complete concepts; everything else – such as a bruise or, to use Leibniz’s example, “being king” – do not have a concept complete enough to pick out a specific individual, and accordingly they do not qualify as individual substances.

Understandably enough, many commentators refer to this as the complete concept theory of substance. It is important to understand just how “complete” Leibniz thought a complete concept was: while we might suppose that it simply contains the predicates corresponding to events between birth and death (or generation and destruction in the case of inanimate objects), Leibniz has something more extensive in mind. He supposes that, on account of the interconnection of things (something merely assumed in the *Discourse* rather than argued for), individual substances such as Alexander will have at all times “vestiges of everything that has happened to him and marks of everything that will happen to him, and even traces of everything that happens in the universe” (A VI 4, 1541/PPL 308).

Having outlined the complete concept theory, Leibniz proceeds in §9 to present some of its corollaries. One of the most important of these is that

²³ Though note that God does not deduce the predicates but simply “sees” (intellectually) that they are contained in the subject; see A VI 4, 1650/SLT 111.

every substance is like an entire world and like a mirror of God, or of the whole universe which it expresses, each in its own way, somewhat as the same town is represented differently depending on the different positions from which it is regarded (A VI 4, 1542/PPL 308).

Leibniz doesn't say how this follows from his complete concept theory of substance, but we may suppose that since every substance contains vestiges of everything that has happened to it, and one of these events is its creation by God who contains within himself the ideas of everything else in the universe, every created substance will thereby express both God and – through him – the entire universe.²⁴ Another corollary of the complete concept theory is that “a substance cannot be divided in two” (A VI 4, 1541/PPL 308), though again Leibniz does not indicate how this follows. Possibly his thinking is that, were a substance to be divided in two then the complete concepts of the resulting substances would have the same predicates up to the time of division and different predicates thereafter. But that would be absurd; after all, a substance's future predicates are deducible from its past ones, and the same set of past predicates cannot entail two different sets of future predicates.²⁵

With the corollaries of the complete concept theory laid out, Leibniz returns to the question he raised at the start of §8, namely how causation is divided or shared between God and creatures. In §14, he argues that while God is the cause of a substance's *being* – since he creates it and continually conserves it in existence – he is ordinarily not the cause of its *action*. Of course, Leibniz has already stipulated that every substance is inherently active, by

²⁴ Leibniz effectively confirms this in §28, where he states that “since every effect expresses its cause, the essence of our soul is a certain expression, imitation, or image of the divine essence, thought, and will and of all the ideas which are comprised in God” (A VI 4, 1573/PPL 321), though here Leibniz appears to be restricting himself to human souls rather than all substances.

²⁵ See Look (2011, 95) for more information.

virtue of its being a substance (since *actiones sunt suppositorum*), but now he explains in what this activity consists. One substance, we are told, does not act upon any other, only upon itself: “what happens to each one is only a consequence of its complete idea or concept alone, since this idea already contains all the predicates or events and expresses the whole universe” (A VI 4, 1551/PPL 312). It is tempting to construe Leibniz’s talk of “what happens” to a substance in terms of its being moved or struck, but this is not what he means. In §14 he asserts that, strictly speaking, “nothing can happen to us except thoughts and perceptions” (A VI 4, 1551/PPL 312), these being the means by which we and every other substance express everything else. The idea that all substances, even non-human ones, have perceptions might seem odd, but Leibniz does not use the term to mean conscious interpretations of sensory information, as we do today, but as a technical term that means “the expression of many in one”; only when the perception is fairly distinct does Leibniz consider it a sensation (A VI 4, 1625/LC 321), though not all substances will have perceptions that qualify.²⁶ Now, borrowing the Scholastic principle that “like causes like”, or “like can only be caused by like”, Leibniz insists that the thoughts and perceptions that happen to a substance can only be caused by preceding thoughts and perceptions; more correctly, by its own thoughts and perceptions, since the thoughts and perceptions a substance has are a consequence of its own complete concept rather than that of another substance (the only exception Leibniz allows to this is God’s action on a substance in the case of a miracle; see A VI 4, 1554-1555/PPL 313-314). Accordingly, the cause of a substance’s thoughts and perceptions is internal to that substance (except in the case of miracles), and there is never any causation between substances. Nevertheless, Leibniz insists that God has so established things from the outset that “all substances mutually correspond, so that each one, carefully following certain reasons or laws it has observed, coincides with others acting likewise” (A VI 4, 1550/PPL 312). In

²⁶ For more information of Leibniz’s notions of perception and expression, see Swoyer 1995.

other words, because each substance's expression of the universe harmonizes with that of all of the others, it will look as though substances are acting upon one another even though in fact they are not.

Leibniz concedes that there is something of a disconnect between our everyday talk of things acting upon other things and what is really happening at the metaphysical level. Rather than reject everyday talk of causation as wrong or misguided, in §15 he explains the sense in which it is true. He suggests that while every substance expresses everything else in the universe, each one does so more or less perfectly and that what we ordinarily think of as action between substances amounts to no more than changes in how perfectly those substances express everything else. His thinking is that in cases when we would typically say that one substance acts upon another, what has happened is that the "acting" substance passes to a more perfect expression, while the other passes to a less perfect expression (A VI 4, 1553-1554/PPL 312-313).

Leibniz's answer to the question of how to distinguish God's action from that of substances is now clear: while substances act upon themselves and only upon themselves, God may act upon them too (in the case of a miracle), but otherwise his action is restricted to creating and conserving them. This presents a clear alternative to the answers proffered by both Descartes and Malebranche. In §§10-12, Leibniz also presents a clear alternative to their ontology of two categories of created substance, namely body and mind. He asserts that "anyone who meditates on the nature of substance, which I have explained above, will find that the entire nature of body does not consist merely in extension, that is, in size, figure, and motion" (A VI 4, 1545/PPL 309). By "the nature of substance" Leibniz appears to mean that substances are by their nature (a) active, and (b) unified, and since bodies understood purely in terms of extension are neither it follows that there must be something else in them, "something related to souls, and which is commonly called substantial form" (A VI 4,

1545/PPL 309). Substantial forms were mainstays of Aristotelian and Scholastic metaphysics, generally considered to be (at least in the latter) the organizing, unifying, and active principle that could be received by prime matter, with the form and matter together resulting in a complete substance. Substantial forms had been roundly attacked by Descartes and fallen into disrepute among “modern” philosophers, so Leibniz’s decision to reintroduce them was in effect to swim against the prevailing philosophical current. Yet as he explains elsewhere, he felt compelled to reintroduce substantial forms in the late 1670s after concluding that the Cartesian account of body as extension was unable to account for two key features of substance, namely unity and activity (A VI 4, 1988-1989/PPL 278-279; A II 1, 757/LGR 48-49). A body that consisted of extension alone, for example, could not act of itself and could be subdivided without end, making it impossible to find anything in it that could be called one thing (see A VI 4, 1988/LC 233-235). Accordingly, Leibniz restores substantial forms to serve as the principle of action (A VI 4, 1465/LC 265; A VI 4, 1508/LC 285) and principle of unity (A VI 4, 1508/LC 287; A VI 4, 1625/LC 321) that bodies require in order to be a substance. This, then, is the ontology Leibniz presents in the *Discourse*: individual substances each consisting of an extended body and a substantial form (some of which are called souls,²⁷ and some of which in turn are called minds; Leibniz will go on to explain the difference in §34).²⁸

²⁷ Note that in §12 Leibniz treats the idea of a soul in animals as hypothetical, writing “if they have one” (A VI 4, 1545/PPL 309), while in §34 he merely *supposes* that animals have souls (A VI 4, 1583/PPL 325). This stands in sharp contrast to other writings of the early- to mid-1680s, where Leibniz is happy to state that animals do have souls and to criticize the Cartesians for denying it and thus for construing animals as pure machines (e.g. A II 1, 860-861/<http://www.leibniz-translations.com/tschirnhaus.htm>; A VI 4, 1624/LC 319).

²⁸ Note that there has been a good deal of scholarly discussion and disagreement about Leibniz’s views on the reality of bodies in his middle and later periods. For an account of some of these, see Lodge 2005.

It is curious that, despite his stated reason for reintroducing substantial forms – namely to explain how bodies could be substances – in the *Discourse* Leibniz does not claim that bodies *are* substances but merely *supposes* that they are, without further commitment. Nowhere is this clearer than in two passages he deleted from the fair copy of the text; the first, from §11, comes immediately after an acknowledgement that others may find his restoration of substantial forms paradoxical, to which he wrote: “I do this [i.e. restore substantial forms] only on the supposition that one may speak of bodies as substances” (A VI 4, 1544). The second, a passage removed from the start of §34, states: “One thing I do not propose to decide is whether in metaphysical rigour bodies are substances or are no more than true phenomena like the rainbow” (A VI 4, 1583).²⁹ It should not be thought that in removing these passages Leibniz was distancing himself from the hesitation expressed therein, for after excising the latter passage, for example, he began §34 as follows: “Supposing that the bodies which make up a *unum per se*, for example man, are substances and that they have substantial forms...” (A VI 4, 1583/PPL 325).³⁰ Leibniz’s decision to merely suppose bodies were substances in the *Discourse* stands in contrast to what we find in other texts written in the years beforehand. In some texts from the first half of the 1680s he is adamant that bodies are substances (e.g. A VI 4, 1398-1399/LC 245-247), while in others he argues for an entirely different explanation. For example, in one short text written between 1683-1685, he claimed that while Descartes “considered bodies as substances, ... I consider them as modes of the mind” or “nothing other than our sensations”. Leibniz goes on to note that this does not mean bodies are unreal: “the reality of bodies is no different from the reality

²⁹ Leibniz’s uncertainty over whether bodies were substances or phenomena is also apparent in a remark deleted from §35 of the fair copy: “For assuredly minds are either the only substances found in the world (in the event that bodies are only true phenomena) or else they are at least the most perfect ones” (A VI 4, 1585).

³⁰ Leibniz here implies that a body such as that of a human being is made up of (numerous) bodies each with its own substantial form.

of dreams except that bodies are in agreement and depend upon a certain rule, and that rule originates from God's will, that is, from a higher intellect" (A VI 4, 1467).³¹ Leibniz would go on to develop these ideas in later writings (for more information, see John Whipple's essay on the De Volder correspondence in this volume).

3. Physics (§§17-22)

From metaphysics, the *Discourse* now turns to physics, though metaphysics is never far away, as we shall see. The pretext for Leibniz's switch to physics is to give an example of a "subordinate maxim" or natural law, but the subtext is to confront two of Descartes' claims regarding physics or natural philosophy, namely that God always conserves the same quantity of motion in the universe and that appeal to final causes should be banished from physics. In overturning the first of these, Leibniz also finds support for his reintroduction of substantial forms.

Let us first consider what Leibniz says about Descartes' conservation law. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes (1984-91, I: 240-241, 243) had argued that God, being immutable, would always conserve in the universe the same quantity of motion, calculated as mass times speed (mv).³² Against this, in §17 Leibniz maintains that what is actually conserved is quantity of force, calculated as mass times the square of the speed (mv^2). He shows this by considering (a) a mass of one pound raised four fathoms and (b) a second mass of four pounds raised one fathom. When both masses are allowed to fall they each acquire the same force (a view Leibniz reaches by considering a swinging pendulum, which always

³¹ English translation available here: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/descartes.htm>

³² Note that when expressing this law, Descartes uses "matter", "parts of matter", or "body" rather than "mass", though in one formulation he indicates that quantity of motion is determined by the size of a body times its speed. See Descartes 1984-1991, I: 244.

acquires the force to raise it back to the height from which it began its descent). Leibniz then seeks to determine the speeds of the same two masses using Galileo's law of falling bodies, which shows that mass (a) would fall at twice the speed of mass (b) and hence that the quantity of motion is not the same in both cases. From this he concludes that as the quantity of force remains the same for the two masses but the quantity of motion does not, the quantity of force cannot be the same thing as the quantity of motion, as Descartes and his followers had supposed (A VI 4, 1557-1558/PPL 314-315).

This anti-Cartesian argument from §17 is a summary of a paper entitled "A brief demonstration of a notable error of Descartes and others concerning a natural law" (A VI 4, 2027-2030/PPL 296-298) that Leibniz wrote in January 1686 – probably before he had started work on the *Discourse* – and published in the March 1686 issue of the *Acta eruditorum* journal. In this paper, Leibniz is content to deploy his argument merely to show the problem with Descartes' conservation law, and this initially appears to be his aim in §17 of the *Discourse* also. But in §18 he goes on to draw a further conclusion not found in "A brief demonstration", namely that, as force is something different from extension and its modifications (namely size, figure, and motion), which is all Descartes allowed in bodies, one has to acknowledge something else in bodies besides extension. This "something else" Leibniz identifies as substantial forms (A VI 4, 1559/PPL 315). He stresses that although one should not appeal to substantial forms to explain natural phenomena (which should always be explained mechanically), they are nevertheless indispensable if we are to understand the principles of the corporeal world that the mechanical philosophy seeks to explain.

In §§19-21, Leibniz turns his attention to final causes, that is, ends or goals, which certain "new philosophers" had sought to banish from physics (A VI 4, 1560/PPL 315). Once again, Leibniz's target is Descartes, who had rejected final causes from physics on the

grounds that the human mind could not hope to discern God's intentions. As he wrote in his *Principles of Philosophy*:

When dealing with natural things we will ... never derive any explanations from the purposes which God or nature may have had in view when creating them and we shall entirely banish from our philosophy the search for final causes. For we should not be so arrogant as to suppose that we can share in God's plans (1984-1991: I, 202, cf. 248).

Many of Descartes' followers took a similar line; for example, in his *Christian Conversations*, Malebranche insisted that "The knowledge of final causes is quite useless for physics, as Descartes claimed" (1677, 87/1695, 45, translation modified). Leibniz took a dim view of the Cartesian position, railing against it in a clutch of anti-Cartesian writings from the 1670s onwards. In some of these, Leibniz claims that Descartes had sought to banish the search for final causes only because, not believing there were any objective rules of goodness, he didn't think God had actually acted in accordance with an end (see for example A II 1, 778);³³ in others, that banishing final causes from physics would make it pointless to posit a supreme intelligence at all (see for example A VI 4, 1481). Leibniz levels similar complaints in the *Discourse*. Most notably, he argues that the banishment of final causes has dangerous consequences when combined with Descartes' view that God is subject to no objective rule of goodness, complaining that, when taken together, the two views are tantamount to denying final causes altogether, "as if God in acting had proposed no end or good" (A VI 4, 1560/PPL 315).

³³ English translation available here: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/cartesianism1679.htm>

Despite Descartes' rejection of any objective standards of goodness, neither he nor his followers denied that God had designs or that the things of his creation were devoid of final causes, only that it would be presumptuous for limited beings such as ourselves to suppose that we could discern what these were. As it happens, Leibniz wasn't unsympathetic to this line of thinking, at least to a certain extent, for he cautions against thinking that we can attain an adequate grasp of God's designs. After all, God's sights extend to the whole of the universe whereas ours do not, which makes it impossible for us to grasp all of God's ends. However, in §19 Leibniz proposes a rule that will lessen the chances of our making mistakes on this matter: "when we see some good effect or some perfection which occurs or which ensues from the works of God, we can safely say that God intended it, for he does nothing by chance" (A VI 4, 1560/PPL 316). In §21, Leibniz develops the point to argue that if God's wisdom is recognizable in "the mechanical structure of particular bodies", then it will also be recognizable "in the general economy of the world and in the constitution of the laws of nature" (A VI 4, 1563/PPL 316-317). To establish the point, he points the reader to an essay on optics he had published in the *Acta eruditorum* journal in 1682, in which he deduced the laws of refraction and reflection from the principle that light always travels by the easiest path. Leibniz took this to be a clear example of final causes, with God evidently having "created light in such a way that from its nature that most beautiful outcome would arise" (1682, 186).

4. The relationship between God and minds (§§23-37)

From physics, Leibniz turns to the topic of minds, which remains his focus for the rest of the *Discourse*. In so doing, he picks up a number of threads left hanging from earlier in the text, namely those concerned with God's action on minds and the relationship between God and minds, and by developing his thoughts on the latter he seeks to establish in the final sections

of the *Discourse* the exalted place of minds in creation. We already know from §14 that God conserves all substances in existence but that – except in cases of miracles – he does not act upon them, with each substance instead causing its own states. While Leibniz does not amend this account, he does seek to finesse it, this time in response to one of Malebranche’s most famous doctrines, that we see all things in God.

Taking inspiration both from John 1.9, which states that God gives light to everyone, and Augustine (1991, 68), who held that the human mind had to be illuminated by the divine, Malebranche held that God is the only true light of our minds and that, accordingly, our perception of physical objects is mediated not via the physical objects themselves but by God. In perceiving a body, Malebranche holds that what happens is this: the ideas (in the sense of abstract concepts) of the body’s primary qualities, being themselves immutable and necessary, exist in the immutable and necessary mind of God, with which we unite in order to share the ideas and thus perceive the body. To this, in §28 Leibniz offers what he takes to be a more correct account. He holds that there is a sense in which “it can be said that God alone is our immediate object outside of us and that we see all things through him” (A VI 4, 1573/PPL 321) in that, although no created thing can act on us, we nevertheless express the created world because we express God, who contains within himself the ideas of all actual and possible beings. Of course we are not always thinking of all these things, but since we are always expressing them it is true to say that “we have in our soul the ideas of all things” (A VI 4, 1573/PPL 321). Here it should be noted that Leibniz offers a different understanding of “ideas” from Malebranche, characterizing them in §26 as dispositions to think of and express particular things rather than abstract concepts (A VI 4, 1570/PPL 320). For these dispositions or ideas we have God to thank, for God gave them to us at creation and he conserves them in us when he conserves us; moreover, by virtue of conserving us he also determines us to think of things at the very moment our bodily senses are appropriately disposed, such that we think

of the Sun when our eyes are looking at the Sun, for example. But Leibniz is adamant that this does not require any direct action of God upon us beyond that of creation and conservation. The ideas we have are genuinely in us and the perceptions we have are produced by us, and therefore there is no need for us to perceive anything via God in the sense Malebranche thought.

In §30 Leibniz turns to the topic of God's action upon our wills. Although he declines to go deeply into the topic, he does identify a way in which God can be said to have "inclined" minds, namely by decreeing that our wills "always strive toward the apparent good" (A VI 4, 1575/PPL 322). Far from this robbing us of free will, Leibniz claims that this striving towards the good is what *constitutes* free will. As he puts it in a text written a few years before the *Discourse*, "true freedom of the mind consists in recognizing and choosing the best" (A VI 4, 1409/SLT 93). Freedom thus involves us using our intellect to determine the best course and then acting in accordance with what we have determined. Leibniz insists that our doing this does not mean that our will is necessitated, given that "it has the power to act otherwise or even to suspend its action entirely, since both are and remain possible" (A VI 4, 1576/PPL 322), in the sense that acting otherwise or suspending action are not in any way contradictory. However, Leibniz notes that failure to exercise this power lies with the individual concerned and not with God.

This leads to a brief discussion of the cause of evil. Leibniz denies that God causes evil and instead puts the blame for it squarely on human beings. While he pays lip service to the traditional idea that evil entered the world through the fall of Adam, he identifies a more fundamental cause, namely human limitation. For "even before that [the fall] there was an original limitation or imperfection naturally belonging to all creatures, which makes them liable to sin or capable of failing" (A VI 4, 1577/PPL 322). Hence because creatures are essentially limited and have insufficient wisdom to know always what the best or right

actions are, they easily fall into sin. Although God, on this account, cannot be to blame for the fact that humans will inevitably fall into sin if created, there still remains the question of why God created them knowing that they would sin, and the further question of why he favours some with his grace – understood as the “first active principle of pious actions” (A VI 4, 1459)³⁴ – more than others? To the first, Leibniz responds by saying that the only answer that can be given is the general one that since God found it good that sinners like Judas should exist “in spite of the sin which God foresaw, it must be that this evil is compensated for with interest in the universe and that God will draw a greater good from it” (A VI 4, 1576/PPL 322), though he does not identify what the greater good is in this (or any other) instance. And likewise, to the second question Leibniz states that we cannot know why, in the dispensation of his grace, God chooses to favour some more than others; while we can be certain that there is a reason for God’s choice, the detail of it is unavailable to us (A VI 4, 1579-1580/PPL 323).

In §32, Leibniz returns once more to the topic of God’s action, restating a point made in §14, namely that “God constitutes the link or communication between substances, and it is through him that the phenomena of the one coincides and agree with those of the others and that consequently there is reality in our perceptions” (A VI 4, 1581/PPL 324). This leads him to present in §33 what would ultimately become one of his signature doctrines, namely the pre-established harmony (though the name itself was coined only much later, in 1696). The pre-established harmony is Leibniz’s solution to the problem of how the human soul and human body, assuming that they are separate substances, form a unity. He quickly rejects the suggestion that the two act upon each other, and he also rejects Malebranche’s doctrine of occasionalism (which was not conceived as a solution to this problem in any case) on the grounds that “it is unreasonable simply to have recourse to the extraordinary operation of the

³⁴ English translation available here: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/freedomgrace.htm>

universal cause in an ordinary and particular thing” (A VI 4, 1582/PPL 324). Leibniz’s solution is to say that, on account of God’s arrangement of things at the outset, soul and body correspond to each other perfectly merely by following their own internal operations. Much of this had already been outlined in §14, which established that the cause of what happens to a substance (excepting miracles) is internal to that substance, that created substances do not act upon each other, and that all created substances mutually correspond. What Leibniz adds to this in §33 is that while every substance corresponds to everything else in the universe, the human soul corresponds “more particularly and more perfectly to what happens in the body which is assigned to it”, and in this lies the answer to “how our body belongs to us without being attached to our essence” (A VI 4, 1582/PPL 325). Leibniz would later outline the doctrine in more detail, and with much more fanfare, in his 1695 paper “New system on the nature and communication of substances” (for more details, see Julia Borcharding’s paper in this volume).

From the pre-established harmony Leibniz passes to a matter first raised in §12, namely the difference between minds and other substances. In §34, Leibniz explains that minds possess two abilities other substances do not, namely that of self-reflection (that is, having some grasp of what they are and what they do) and of knowing necessary truths. Their self-reflection gives minds a moral quality in the sense that they remain the same person, not just in this life but after it. Leibniz argues that while no substance can entirely perish (since, being indivisible, they cannot be broken down) and consequently all substances will enjoy “perpetual subsistence” (A VI 4, 1584/PPL 325), he insists that in the case of minds this subsistence will amount to true immortality where it is not just the substance that subsists but also its memory and self-consciousness. As the preservation of such features is what is required for the reward and punishment they will face both in this life and the life to come, Leibniz is certain that they will be preserved. However, he does not explain how they are

preserved, only that God will ensure that they are: “it must not be doubted that God has ordered everything in such a way that minds may not only live forever, which is inevitable, but also forever preserve their moral quality” (A VI 4, 1587/PPL 327).

Despite its strong focus on theology, the *Discourse* thus far has yielded little that is distinctly *Christian*. This changes in §§36-37, in which Leibniz uses two well-known Christian motifs (albeit giving both of them a distinct twist) along with a raft of scriptural references to support a number of his claims. The first of the Christian motifs arises in §36 in connection with his claim that “although every substance expresses the whole universe, nevertheless the other substances express the world rather than God, while minds express God rather than the world” (A VI 4, 1587/PPL 327). On the surface this looks to be in conflict with the claim in §9 that all substances express both God and the world, though this is because in the *Discourse* Leibniz unhelpfully uses the term “expression” in two different senses. In §9, as we have seen, “expression” refers to effects (substances) representing their cause (God), while in §36 it is used in the sense of being “created in the image of”.³⁵ Hence his point there is that minds are made in God’s image while other substances are not, or as he puts it near the start of §36, “minds alone are made in his image” (A VI 4, 1586/PPL 327). In the *Discourse*, Leibniz takes this to mean that minds are rational and free, these being qualities we share with God (A VI 4, 1586/PPL 327).³⁶ The claim that minds are made in God’s image is clearly meant to evoke Genesis 1.27-8, 5.1-2, and 9.6 in his reader’s mind, though note that Leibniz goes beyond what is said in Genesis, which very clearly states that

³⁵ Leibniz uses the term “expression” in this second sense in other contemporaneous texts too; see for example A VI 4, 1624/LC 319.

³⁶ Malebranche (1993, 163), by contrast, offered a Trinitarian account of our being made in God’s image, fusing it with some of his central philosophical doctrines; he claimed that the Father shares with us some of his power (making us occasional causes of our actions), the Son some of his wisdom (disclosing truths to us via our union with God), and the Holy Spirit a tendency to the good.

human beings are made in God's image rather than *minds*. For Leibniz, the category of minds is not exclusively made up of human beings, as it incorporates higher (superhuman) beings such as genii and angels as well (see A VI 4, 1507/LC 285), though this is not stated in the *Discourse*.

The second Christian motif is introduced in connection with the claim that the excellence of minds is such that God enters into a society with them, not as equals, but as a prince enters society with his subjects. Leibniz refers to this society as the "city of God" (A VI 4, 1587/PPL 327), a term borrowed from St Augustine (354–430 CE), who wrote a book with that title. However Leibniz's understanding of the "city of God" is not the same as Augustine's: for Augustine, the city of God is the Christian church, encompassing the saints, the angels, and the blessed. Moreover, it is a heavenly or celestial city, which exists on Earth only for a time (as such it is contrasted with the Earthly City).³⁷ Leibniz's city of God, on the other hand, is populated not just by Christian minds but by all minds. He also envisages it enduring forever, just as its inhabitants do. In this city, minds can look forward to great happiness, for just as a beneficent prince desires his subjects be as happy as possible, so God wishes the same for minds; indeed, Leibniz declares that the happiness of minds is God's principal design (A VI 4, 1587/PPL 327).

The *Discourse* ends with Leibniz offering a slew of quotations from the New Testament, most of which involve God's concern for his creatures (e.g. Matthew 10.29-30) or the rewards to come in the afterlife (e.g. Matthew 13.43 and I Corinthians 2.9). That Leibniz should conclude the text this way is not surprising. For one thing, it is worth noting that in an age which frowned upon novelty and unorthodoxy, it was commonplace for philosophers to show that their ideas harmonized with the Bible, or at least were not in conflict with it. Incorporating a number of choice scriptural passages in one's work was the accepted method

³⁷ The idea of such a city of God is rooted in Scripture, for example Psalm 87.3, Psalm 48.1, and Psalm 46.4.

to show that this was indeed so. But perhaps more importantly, given that one of Leibniz's chief targets in the *Discourse* is Malebranche, who littered his work with biblical quotations, Leibniz undoubtedly would have realized the value of insinuating that the theological vision he outlined in the text was supported by scripture too.

5. The Purpose of the *Discourse*

Having now charted the main contours of the *Discourse*, all that remains is to consider its purpose. What led Leibniz to write it? The question is a tricky one because his motives are not made explicit either in the *Discourse* itself or in the only other text that mentions it, namely the letter to Landgrave Ernst of 1/11 February 1686. In the absence of any pronouncements on Leibniz's part, many theories have been put forward as to his motives, but here I shall focus on just one, that the *Discourse* was intended to serve an ecumenical purpose.³⁸

This idea dates back more than a century. In 1907, Henri Lestienne (1907, 10) suggested that the *Discourse* may have been intended to contribute to Leibniz's long-standing ambition to reconcile the Christian confessions through philosophy, by providing a philosophical underpinning for Christian dogmas that would also serve to remove the differences between the confessions. Although Lestienne's suggestion was made speculatively and without any evidence, it was enthusiastically endorsed by later scholars, some of whom sought to connect it with Leibniz's Catholic Demonstrations, a grand theological project conceived in the late 1660s and intended as a systematic apology for the

³⁸ For others, see Wilson (1989, 79), who views the *Discourse* as a trial balloon for Leibniz's possible conversion to Catholicism, and Jolley (2004, 126), who argues that the *Discourse* is "a systematic refutation of Malebranche".

Christian faith built upon the framework of Catholicism.³⁹ Hence Loemker (1947, 450) suggested that “The *Discourse* is probably a preliminary study for the preface to Leibniz’s long-projected *Demonstrationes Catholicae* [Catholic Demonstrations]” (for cognate suggestions, see that of Martin and Brown in Leibniz (1998, 2), and WFT 53).⁴⁰ While the original *Catholic Demonstrations* project was abandoned in 1672 following the death of Leibniz’s patron, Baron von Boineburg, Leibniz did not entirely forget about it: in 1679 he made a short-lived attempt to reactivate it,⁴¹ and several years later, in the early- to mid-1680s, he drafted a host of short essays that examined and defended various Christian – specifically Catholic – doctrines,⁴² with one of these essays bearing the “Catholic Demonstrations” title.⁴³ However, situating the *Discourse* as part of this revived Catholic Demonstrations project (if that is indeed what it was) is problematic, not least because, in terms of content, the *Discourse* sits uneasily alongside these other texts: while the other texts typically focus on matters of controversy (e.g. the canonicity of scripture, the importance of tradition, and authority of the Pope), the *Discourse* does not.

Perhaps even more revealing is Leibniz’s choice of language for the Catholic Demonstrations writings on the one hand, and the *Discourse* on the other. The original

³⁹ For some of the texts of this project, see A VI 1, 489-559; partial English translation in LGR 21-46.

⁴⁰ It should be noted that in reaching this view Loemker (1947, 452) supposed that the central problem of the *Discourse* was that of God’s grace and human freedom, which is scarcely credible given the sheer range of topics Leibniz treats in the text (not to mention that grace is mentioned in only three of the *Discourse*’s 37 sections).

⁴¹ See A II 1, 756-759/LGR 47-51.

⁴² For example, “Apologia fidei catholicae ex recta ratione” (A IV 3, 226–233); “On Scripture, the Church and the Trinity” (A VI 4, 2286-2291/LGR 227-232); “On God and the Church” (A VI 4, 2347–2350/LGR 232-235).

⁴³ Namely, “Specimen of *Catholic Demonstrations*, or, Apology for the faith through reason” (A VI 4, 2323–2327/LGR 103-108).

Catholic Demonstrations project (and its 1680s sequel, if that is what it was) was intended for all of Christendom, or at least all of European Christendom, and accordingly Leibniz wrote the texts for it in Latin, which was still the universal language of Europe at the time. The *Discourse*, however, was written in French, which would have guaranteed a much more restricted audience, an unwise decision if the text was indeed intended to serve an ecumenical purpose. However, if Leibniz's decision to write the *Discourse* in French speaks against its being part of any formal ecumenical project, it does at least offer us a clue as to his motivations. Evidently, his intended audience for the text was French-speaking philosophers (mostly concentrated in France, of course, but with some in Holland and other countries), and it is no coincidence that a great many of these were supporters of Descartes and/or Malebranche, the very thinkers whose ideas Leibniz looks to supplant in the *Discourse*. Indeed, had the *Discourse* been published it would likely have been construed as a corrective to Descartes and Malebranche. While Leibniz rarely mentions either by name in the *Discourse* (Descartes is mentioned by name just three times, Malebranche not at all), their doctrines are front and centre throughout the text, as any educated French-reader of the day would have realized. Such a reader would also have noticed Leibniz carefully positioning himself relative to Descartes and Malebranche, using their doctrines as a foil to advance his own thoughts (which, as we have seen, had been developed and honed in a suite of earlier notes and fragments in which Leibniz specifically engaged the philosophy of these two thinkers). The *Discourse* is therefore likely to have been conceived as an attempt to reach supporters of Descartes and Malebranche, not only to challenge key tenets of their respective philosophies but also to present a viable alternative.⁴⁴ But this was not merely an attempt at philosophical one-upmanship; as should be clear from our examination of the *Discourse*, it

⁴⁴ Leibniz would later wage a campaign against Descartes and the Cartesians in various journals; see for example Dutens II, 243-244; A I 20, 247-248/LGR 66-69.

was rather motivated by Leibniz's desire to replace doctrines he believed were theologically dangerous and potentially harmful to piety with those that he thought would contribute to the advancement of piety. Accordingly, in a nod to Lestienne's suggestion, we can say that, while the *Discourse* does not appear to have been conceived with ecumenism in mind, Leibniz clearly hoped and expected that the doctrines outlined therein would promote God's cause and therefore contribute to the piety of those exposed to them.^{45 46}

Further Reading

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⁴⁵ However, in a trivial sense this is true of much of what Leibniz wrote. He once claimed that even his work in mathematics and the sciences was motivated by the advancement of piety; see A II 1, 758/LGR 49.

⁴⁶ I would like to thank Daniel J. Cook, Paul Lodge and Julia Weckend for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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