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Leibniz Encounters Maimonides

Leibniz's reading notes on the *Guide of the Perplexed*—translated into English here for the first time—represent his deepest engagement with Maimonides. In order to provide some context for Leibniz's notes, it is worthwhile taking a moment to consider the only remarks Leibniz himself published on Maimonides, in §§262–263 of his *Theodicy* (1710). A deep dive here can help us understand what Leibniz knew of Maimonides' *Guide*, from whom, and when.

In §262 of the *Theodicy*, his book-length response to the sceptical arguments of Pierre Bayle, Leibniz considered the question of whether there was more good than evil in the world, and quoted with approval a passage from book 3, chapter 12 of Maimonides' *Guide*:

But even though there should have fallen to the lot of the human kind more evil than good, it is enough where God is concerned that there is incomparably more good than evil in the universe. Rabbi Maimonides (whose merit is not sufficiently recognized in the statement that he is the first of the Rabbis to have ceased talking nonsense) also gave wise judgement on this question of the predominance of good over evil in the world. Here is what he says in his *Doctor Perplexorum* (cap. 12, p. 3): 'There arise often in the hearts of ill-instructed persons thoughts which persuade them there is more evil than good in the world: and one often finds in the poems and songs of the pagans that it is as it were a miracle when something good comes to pass, whereas evils are usual and constant. This error has taken hold not of the common herd only, those very persons who wish to be considered wise have been beguiled thereby. A celebrated writer named Alrasi, in his *Sepher Elohuth*, or Theosophy, amongst other absurdities has stated that there are more evils than goods, and that upon comparison of the recreations and the pleasures man enjoys in times of tranquillity with the pains, the torments, the troubles, faults, cares, griefs and afflictions whereby he is overwhelmed our life would prove to be a great evil, and an actual penalty inflicted upon us to punish us.' Maimonides adds that the cause of their extravagant error is their supposition that Nature was made for them only, and that they hold of no account what is separate from their person; whence they infer that when something displeasing to them occurs all goes ill in the universe.¹

In §263, Leibniz indicates his approval of Maimonides' position:

M. Bayle says that this observation of Maimonides is not to the point, because the question is whether among men evil exceeds good. But, upon consideration of the Rabbi's words, I find that the question he formulates is general, and that he wished to refute those who decide it on one particular motive derived from the evils of the human race, as if all had been made for man; and it seems as though the author whom he refutes spoke also of good and evil in general. Maimonides is right in saying that if one took into account the littleness of man in relation to the universe one would comprehend clearly that the predominance of evil, even though it prevailed among men, need not on that account occur among the angels, nor among the heavenly bodies, nor among the elements and inanimate compounds, nor among many kinds of animals.²

¹ G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1990), 287–288.

² Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 288.

How did Leibniz happen upon the passage from Maimonides? In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz provided his own French translation of the passage, based on pp.354–355 of Johann Buxtorf’s Latin translation of Maimonides’ *Guide*, namely *Doctor perplexorum* (1629).³ One might suppose that Leibniz drew the passage directly from Buxtorf’s translation. But in fact, Leibniz’s source was not Buxtorf but rather the second edition of Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1702), or more specifically, a set of planned additions and corrections for the third edition that Bayle printed at the end of the second edition.⁴ The passage Leibniz cites in §262 of his *Theodicy* is the same one cited by Bayle. Moreover, every detail Leibniz provides of Maimonides’ position is to be found in the remarks Bayle made on the passage, virtually verbatim. This would suggest that at the time of writing the *Theodicy*, Leibniz had no deeper knowledge of the *Guide* than the short excerpt of it he had found in Bayle.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the unpublished manuscripts of the *Theodicy*. In the original first draft (which is without § numbers), Leibniz quotes the same passage from Maimonides,⁵ following it with this intriguing comment, which he subsequently deleted: “I suspect that there is something missing in the text of Maimonides, in which he will have maintained that even among men prosperity prevails over adversity, because he was too good a logician to change the question in this way.”⁶ In fact, in book 3, chapter 12 of the *Guide*, Maimonides doesn’t make the argument Leibniz suspected he had; Maimonides’ point is rather that humans often labour under the misconception that the universe was made for them (and specifically, for their convenience and pleasure), and that in any case most of those disgruntled with the universe seek unnecessary things rather than content themselves with the necessities of life. In his original comment on the passage of Maimonides, Leibniz did no more than guess at what Maimonides’ argument would be, and chide Bayle for omitting the key part of it. The fact that Leibniz resorted to guessing (and guessing incorrectly!) at Maimonides’ argument indicates that he had not read the *Guide* at the time he wrote the initial draft of the *Theodicy*. Since that draft dates to c. 1707, it is reasonable to suppose that Leibniz’s first reading of Maimonides’ *Guide* occurred later than this.

However, Leibniz had certainly read some of the *Guide* prior to 1707, namely, the dedicatory letter at the start, which was published by Thomas Hyde in 1690 as a bilingual 4-page pamphlet with Maimonides’ original Arabic on the left hand side and a Latin translation on the right.⁷ Hyde’s pamphlet was intended as a sample to make the case for a complete edition of the *Guide*, though such an edition did not appear.⁸ Leibniz read Hyde’s pamphlet

³ Moses Maimonides, *Doctor perplexorum*, trans. Johann Buxtorf (Basel: König, 1629), 354–355.

⁴ Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 3 vols. (Rotterdam: Reinier Leers, 1702), III: 3189. In accordance with Bayle’s plans, a posthumous third edition of the *Dictionary* was issued in 1715, with the Maimonides passage in question appearing in note K of the article “Xenophanes”. See Pierre Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, (Rotterdam: n.p., 1715, 3ed), III: 889.

⁵ The unpublished manuscripts of the *Theodicy* show that Leibniz’s original intention was to quote the passage from Maimonides in Latin, as Bayle had in his *Dictionary*; this is how Leibniz had it in his first draft and in the fair copy. But the fair copy shows that Leibniz then changed his mind, as there he crossed out the Latin quotation, replacing it with his own French translation. The manuscripts are held by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hannover; for the first draft, see LH 1, 1, 2 Bl. 120; for the fair copy, see LH 1, 1, 1 Bl. 193.

⁶ LH 1, 1, 2 Bl. 120. Before writing and deleting this passage, Leibniz wrote and deleted another, this time introducing the Maimonides passage with this: “I would give almost the same praise to Rabbi Maimonides as Mr. Méric Casaubon gave to Euripides if a natural piety were not enough to inspire the sentiment in which he will have maintained that even among men prosperity prevails over adversity.”

⁷ Thomas Hyde, *Proponitur, Maimonidis More Nevochim typis mandandum Lingua Arabica, qua ab Authore primo scriptum est* (Oxford: n.p., 1690).

⁸ The short sample of Maimonides was subsequently republished in a posthumous collection of Hyde’s works: Thomas Hyde, *Syntagma dissertationum quas olim auctor doctissimus Thomas Hyde S.T.P. separatim edidit*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1767), II: 435–438.

in 1696: in a letter to Ezechiel Spanheim of 23 December 1696, he wrote: “Mr. Thomas Hyde has printed Maimonides’ *Moreh Nevochim* in Arabic as it was written by the author with the Latin version by Buxtorf, and some notes which seemed excellent, judging by the essay sent to me.”⁹

Another brush with the *Guide* occurred ten years later. In a letter of 26 October 1706, another of Leibniz’s correspondents, Hermann von der Hardt, provided some details of Maimonides’ interpretation (in the *Guide* II.42) of the visions and dreams of Bileam, a soothsayer who features in several chapters of the Book of Numbers. Von der Hardt explained that Maimonides had interpreted the episode of the talking she-ass in Numbers 22 as occurring in Balaam’s dream, exactly as Leibniz had in an essay on the subject written shortly beforehand.¹⁰ Von der Hardt’s description of Maimonides as “the first among the Jews to cease talking nonsense”¹¹ was later borrowed by Leibniz in §262 of his *Theodicy*, quoted above.

As for Leibniz’s reading notes on the Buxtorf edition of the *Guide*, the paper contains watermarks attested to 1685 and 1708; the former is clearly too early for the date of composition, as Leibniz had not read the whole of the *Guide* even by 1707, as we have seen. However, the latter date is a good fit. In which case it is likely that Leibniz encountered Maimonides late in life, probably around 1708, eight years before his death. We could even speculate that the catalyst for his reading Maimonides was the information received from von der Hardt and the passage Leibniz encountered in Bayle’s *Dictionary*, both of which suggested that there were sympathies, perhaps even overlaps, between Maimonides’ thought and his own, this prompting him to get hold of Buxtorf’s translation. And certainly, as his reading notes on the *Guide* indicate, Leibniz did find plenty of things in Maimonides’ thought worthy of his attention and approval.

⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe. Erste Reihe. Dreizehnter Band*. Edited by Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 444.

¹⁰ Namely, “The story of Bileam”, written early September 1706. English translation in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Leibniz on God and Religion*, ed. and trans. Lloyd Strickland (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 187–193.

¹¹ Hermann von der Hardt to Leibniz, 26 October 1706, LBr. 366 Bl. 292v.