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When Did Leibniz Read Maimonides?

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1. Introduction

Leibniz's detailed reading notes on the *Guide of the Perplexed* represent his deepest engagement with Maimonides. The existence of these notes have led some scholars to claim that Leibniz was not just influenced by Maimonides, but in fact developed some of the key doctrines of his later philosophy from ideas he encountered when reading Maimonides' *Guide*.¹ For example, Nicole Ulmann argues that Leibniz borrowed the notion of simple substance and his division of evil into metaphysical, physical, and moral.² Lenn Goodman goes even further, suggesting that the impact of Maimonides on Leibniz can be seen in Leibniz's theory of monads, his understanding of free will, and the issues of creation, determinism, and possible worlds.³ Such claims of influence of course presuppose that Leibniz read Maimonides' *Guide* relatively early in his career, certainly before he had settled on his mature philosophy. Curiously, both Ulmann and Goodman are content to base their claims of influence on this presupposition: neither makes any attempt to show when Leibniz read Maimonides, simply assuming that it was early enough for Leibniz to be influenced by him, such that any points of contact in their respective philosophies must have been due to Leibniz drawing upon Maimonides as opposed to any other sources.

In this paper, my aim is to answer the question of when Leibniz read Maimonides' *Guide*. I am going to argue that it happened not early in his career, as Goodman and Ulmann suppose, but late, in fact very late, probably after 1707.

2. Leibniz's Reading Notes on Maimonides' *Guide*

To answer the question of when Leibniz read Maimonides, the obvious place to start is with his detailed reading notes on the *Guide*.⁴ Leibniz indicates that he read Johann Buxtorf's Latin translation of the *Guide*, entitled *Doctor perplexorum* and published in 1629.⁵ Leibniz's notes appear to have been made on his first reading of the book, since in his notes Leibniz writes that Maimonides' book is "more philosophical than I had thought",⁶ suggesting he hadn't read the book prior to making notes on it. So when were Leibniz's reading notes written? Unfortunately Leibniz did not date the manuscript. In cases like this, the watermark of the paper can sometimes indicate a likely date range, but unfortunately Leibniz's notes on Maimonides cannot be dated by watermark either. Another way of dating texts is by internal evidence: useful internal evidence would be if somewhere in the text Leibniz mentions an event or a recently-published book that would allow us to narrow down the date. Useful external evidence would be if Leibniz wrote a dated letter to someone saying that he had just read Maimonides' book and made notes on it; we would then know that his reading notes were written just before the letter. Unfortunately there is no such internal or external evidence available, and this is why the Academy editors give Leibniz's reading notes a very wide date range of 1677 – 1716.

3. Maimonides in Leibniz's *Theodicy*

As it happens, there *is* some external evidence that sheds light on when Leibniz first read Maimonides, but it's not easy to find. To get to it, the best place to start is with the only remarks Leibniz himself published on Maimonides, in §§262–263 of his *Theodicy* (1710). A deep dive here

¹ Namely, Nicole Ulmann: "Leibniz lecteur de Maimonide", in *Les nouveaux cahiers* 24 (1971), pp. 13–17.

Lenn E. Goodman: "Maimonides and Leibniz", in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 31/2 (1980), pp. 214–236.

² Hence Ulmann states that Maimonides was "[...] a deep and determining influence for the development of his [Leibniz's] own system [...]" (16) and that Leibniz "[...] found in Maimonides fruitful guiding ideas [...]" (17), even going so far as to suppose that when Leibniz wrote in the *New Essays* (A VI 6, 431) that there is gold hidden in the dross of scholasticism, he had Maimonides in mind.

³ Goodman: "Maimonides and Leibniz", p. 214.

⁴ See A VI 4, 2484–2497.

⁵ Moses Maimonides: *Doctor perplexorum*, ed. and trans. Johann Buxtorf, Basel 1629.

⁶ A VI 4, 2484.

can help us understand what Leibniz knew of Maimonides' *Guide*, from whom he knew it, and when he knew it.

The *Theodicy* is, as we know, Leibniz's book-length response to the sceptical arguments of Pierre Bayle, as found in Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* and other works. In §262 of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz considers the question of whether there is more good than evil in the world, and quotes 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."⁷

Having outlined Maimonides' position in §262 of the *Theodicy*, in §263 Leibniz goes on to indicate his approval:

"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."⁸

How did Leibniz happen upon the passage from Maimonides? In the *Theodicy*, Leibniz cites pages 354–355 of Buxtorf's Latin translation, providing his own French translation of the passage.⁹ One might suppose that Leibniz drew the passage directly from Buxtorf's edition. But in fact, Leibniz's source was not Buxtorf but rather the second edition of Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1702), or more correctly, a set of planned additions and corrections for the third edition that Bayle printed at the end of the second edition.¹⁰ The passage Leibniz cites in §262 of his *Theodicy* is the same one cited by Bayle. In addition, every detail Leibniz provides of Maimonides' position is to be found in the remarks Bayle made on the passage, virtually verbatim. This would suggest a good working hypothesis is 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.

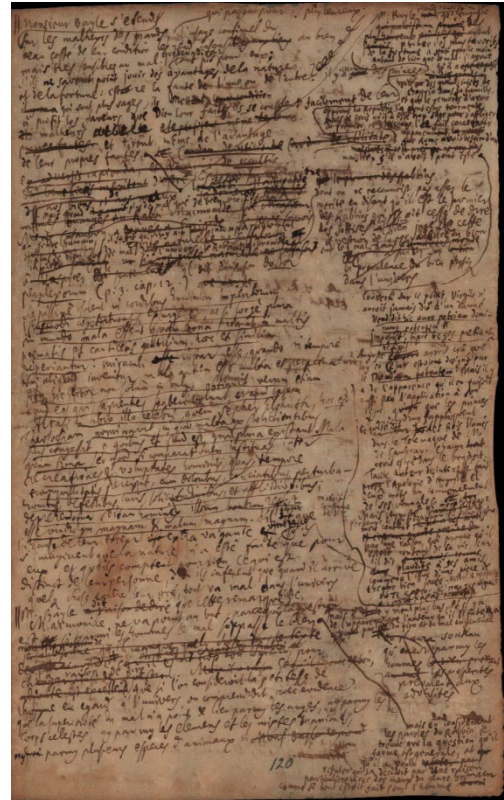
⁷ G. W. Leibniz: *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrar, trans. E. M. Huggard, Chicago 1990, pp. 287–288.

⁸ Leibniz: *Theodicy*, p. 288.

⁹ Maimonides: *Doctor perplexorum*, pp. 354–355.

¹⁰ Pierre Bayle: *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 3 vols., Rotterdam 1702, 2nd ed., III: p. 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: 1715, 3ed, III: 889.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the unpublished manuscripts of the *Theodicy*. In the original first draft (which doesn't have § numbers), Leibniz quotes the same passage from Maimonides,¹¹ 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."¹² 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 criticize Bayle for omitting the key part of it. The fact that Leibniz resorted to guessing at Maimonides' argument—and guessing incorrectly!—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.¹³



4. Leibniz's Earlier Encounters with Maimonides

However, that is not quite the end of the story because Leibniz had certainly read some of the *Guide* prior to 1707, though only the dedicatory letter at the start, which contains no philosophical material.

¹¹ 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.

¹² LH 1, 1, 2 Bl. 120. In the original: "Je soupconne qu'il manque quelq chose dans le texte de Maimonide ou il aura soutenu qu'encor parmy les hommes les prosperités prevalent aux adversités, car il estoit trop bon logicien pour changer ainsi de question." 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." In the original: "Je donnerois presq les memes louanges au Rabbi Maimonide, que Monsieur Meric Casaubon a donné a Euripide si une pieté naturelle ne suffisait à inspirer le sentiment ou il aura soutenu qu'encor parmy les hommes, les prosperités prevalent aux adversités."

¹³ When he first published Leibniz's reading notes on Maimonides' *Guide* in 1861, Louis-Alexandre Foucher de Careil suggested that they were probably written between 1700–1710, on the basis that during this time Leibniz was working "[...] on the origins of Spinozism and its relations with Jewish philosophy [...]". Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: *La philosophie juive et la Cabala*, ed. A. Foucher de Careil, Paris 1861, p. 8. It is worth noting in passing that Leibniz's knowledge of Maimonides prior to 1707 is always second-hand. For example, Leibniz cites the *Guide* in his reading notes on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* from 1675 or 1676 (A VI 3, 254), but Leibniz here simply cites a passage from the *Guide* that Spinoza himself had cited, so there's no evidence here of Leibniz having read the *Guide* himself at this time. Likewise, in a letter to Thomas Burnett of 11/21 June 1695, Leibniz writes "The passages of Maimonides concerning the Sabeans have shed great light [...]" (A I 11, 515), but this information was provided to him by Hermann von der Hardt in a letter written two months earlier, of 10/20 April 1695 (A I 11, 411).

How did Leibniz come to read this? In 1690, the English linguist and orientalist Thomas Hyde (1636–1703) decided that a new edition of Maimonides' *Guide* was needed. In an attempt to find "promoters" for this new edition (by which he presumably meant people prepared to offer financial support), he produced a bilingual 4-page pamphlet. On the title page Hyde explained why a new edition was needed: Buxtorf's Latin edition of 1629 was now very hard to find, and while mostly accurate, it was sometimes incorrect. Hyde also appears to have mistakenly believed that Maimonides originally wrote the *Guide* in Arabic using the Arabic alphabet, which had then been put into the Hebrew alphabet. In Hyde's view this has added to the confusion, but in this he was wrong: in fact, Maimonides had originally written the *Guide* in Arabic using the Hebrew alphabet. The remaining 3 pages of the pamphlet feature Maimonides' dedicatory letter from the start of the *Guide*: on the left hand side of each page Hyde presented an Arabic transcription, and on the right his own Latin translation, with various notes at the bottom of the page.¹⁴



Hyde's pamphlet was intended as a sample to secure the backing for a complete edition of the *Guide*, though such an edition did not appear.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Leibniz read Hyde's pamphlet in 1696: in a letter to Ezechiel Spanheim of 23 December that year, he wrote: "Mr. Thomas Hyde has printed Maimonides' *More 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."¹⁶ Here Leibniz repeats Hyde's error that the *Guide* was originally written in Arabic using the Arabic alphabet. He also makes a mistake of his own, supposing that Hyde had reprinted Buxtorf's Latin translation, whereas in fact Hyde had made the translation himself.

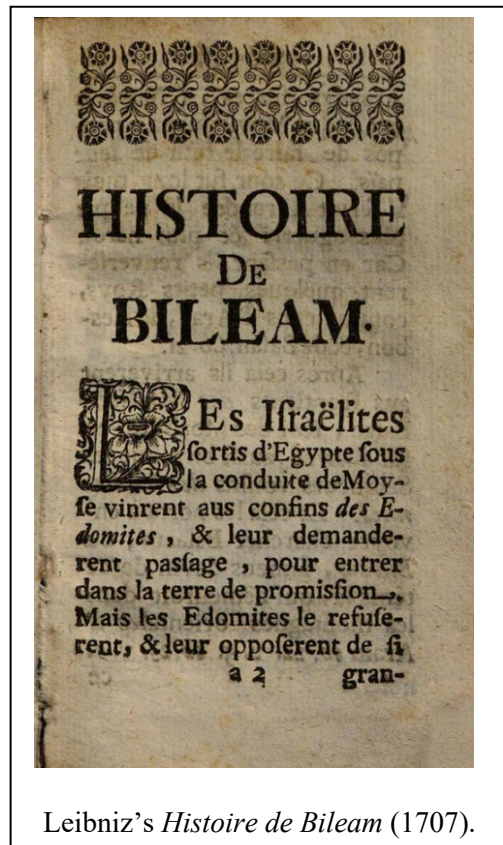
¹⁴ Thomas Hyde: *Proponitur, Maimonidis More Nevochim typis mandandum Lingua Arabica, qua ab Authore primo scriptum est*, Oxford 1690.

¹⁵ 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 1767, II: pp. 435–438.

¹⁶ Leibniz to Ezechiel Spanheim, 23 December 1696, A I 13, 444.

Another brush with the *Guide* occurred ten years later, though a bit of background will provide some useful context here. On 27 August 1706, Leibniz received from Hermann von der Hardt a lengthy Latin essay entitled “Bileami Asinus” [The ass of Balaam], about a soothsayer who features in several chapters of the Old Testament book of Numbers.¹⁷ This prompted Leibniz to write his own essay on Balaam, which he sent to von der Hardt on 7 September 1706, noting that it had been produced from both his own reflections and those of his correspondent.¹⁸ Leibniz’s essay was subsequently published in a short-run collection of essays edited (and mostly written) by von der Hardt.¹⁹ Now, in two subsequent letters to Leibniz, of 21 September and 26 October 1706, von der Hardt provided some details of Maimonides’ interpretation (in the *Guide* II.42) of the dreams of Balaam. 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 his own essay on the subject written shortly beforehand.²⁰ In the later of the two letters, von der Hardt also described Maimonides as “[...] the first among the Jews to cease talking nonsense [...]”;²¹ Leibniz later borrowed these words in §262 of his *Theodicy*, in the passage quoted near the start of this paper.

We could even speculate that the catalyst for Leibniz’s reading of Maimonides was the information he received from von der Hardt and the passage he 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 make his own notes on it. Whether this is what happened or not, at any rate his reading notes on the *Guide* indicate that when Leibniz did get around to reading the book he certainly found plenty of things in Maimonides’ thought worthy of his attention and approval, even if any influence of Maimonides on him would have to have occurred very late in his career.



Leibniz’s *Histoire de Bileam* (1707).

¹⁷ The manuscript of von der Hardt’s essay is held in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hanover, under the shelfmark LBr 366 Bl. 297–310.

¹⁸ Leibniz to Hermann von der Hardt, 7 September 1706, A I 26, 471.

¹⁹ [Anon.]: *Histoire de Bileam. Renards de Samson. Machoire d’âne. Corbeaus d’Elie. L’antechrist*, [Helmstadt] [1707]), pp. 3–19. English translation in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Leibniz on God and Religion*, ed. and trans. Lloyd Strickland, London 2016, pp. 189–193.

²⁰ Hermann von der Hardt to Leibniz, 21 September 1706, A I 26, 501; Hermann von der Hardt to Leibniz, 26 October 1706, A I 26, 659.

²¹ Hermann von der Hardt to Leibniz, 26 October 1706, A I 26, 659.