

THE SHORTER LEIBNIZ TEXTS

A Collection of New Translations

Lloyd Strickland



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B. Optimism and Meliorism¹⁰

1. The elements of true piety, or, on the love of God over everything (early 1677–early 1678?)¹¹

I call them *elements*, because they depend on demonstrations that are certain.

I talk of *piety*, not merely of moral virtues, because anyone is able to live rightly merely on account of human causes, such as education, custom, public peace, personal safety, and good repute. However we are concerned here with those things that we do or endure because of God.

To love is to be delighted by the happiness of someone, or to experience pleasure from the happiness of another. I define this as true love, which through its acknowledged cause differs from simple affection or even expedient friendship. I have sometimes discovered a notable use for this definition in discussion with a number of friends, who did not sufficiently grasp how the lover seeks the good of the beloved with no consideration of the wealth accruing to him; for it seems that whatever we do, we do it for our own good, and not for another's. Therefore how is it possible that we hope for the good of the beloved in itself? The difficulty is clearly resolved with the help of this definition, which shows that the happiness of the beloved is part of our own happiness. For just as we consider a painting excellent not because of some usefulness to us, but because of its own beauty, so we seek the happiness of the beloved for no other reason than that our acquaintance with it bathes us with pleasure. Just as it is evident from this corollary:

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Corollary of the definition

The good of the beloved is desired in itself.

Demonstration:

The good of the beloved delights the lover,
from the hypothesis supposed in the definition of love, for we have defined love as being delighted by the happiness of another.

Whatever delights is to that extent desired in itself.

This proposition is evident, for things that delight us, even if they have no use, are desired nonetheless. And whatever things we desire, we desire them because they bring pleasure, or remove some pain. And if they bring about immediate pleasure, they are said to that extent to be desired in themselves, but if they serve only to obtain something else, which in fact produces pleasure, then they are sought only for the sake of the other thing. Therefore it is clear that things pleasant in themselves are desired, and useful things are desired because of the pleasant things.

Therefore the good of the beloved is sought in itself by the lover.

The beautiful is that, the contemplation of which is pleasant.

The good is that which contributes to delight.

Happiness is enduring joy.

Joy or delight is a feeling of perfection.

God is the most perfect being.

Perfection is the degree or quantity of reality.

Hence the most perfect is that which has the highest degree of reality. In other words, that being which contains as much reality and as many qualities and powers as is possible to belong to one subject at the same time. Hence it is understood that God has no limits of presence, of duration, of knowledge or of operation, and possesses as much of these as is possible to be possessed by one being.

Harmony is unity in variety.

Corollaries of these definitions

From many possible ways the more perfect is the one which brings it about that more reality exists in a given volume or receptacle.

This means more bodies in a given space, more motion in a given time, more forms in a given matter, and more qualities in a given subject.¹² Therefore the opposite of perfection is a vacuum in place, in time, in matter, in forms. The opposite is also redundant or superfluous to perfection, because ultimately it introduces a vacuum by consequence, for it removes space for more useful things and lacks its own space where it might more usefully be placed. Likewise, he who puts goods into a box is careful to arrange everything so that he wastes the least space; and nature itself collects liquid from hostile drought or squeezes a different fluid into a round drop, whereby it is exposed to the least amount of harm, because it encloses more matter within the same periphery. For the periphery alone, not that which is actually inside it, is exposed to harm. And the sphere is the most capacious of the shapes that have the same circumference.

Harmony is the perfection of thinkable things insofar as they are thinkable.

Harmony is when many things are reduced to a kind of unity. For where there is no variety, there is no harmony, and *the musician who always plays*: you know the rest.¹³ In turn, where variety is without order, without proportion, without concord, there is no harmony. From this it is evident that however much greater is both the variety and the unity in variety, so much greater is the harmony. Hence the dissonances themselves increase the loveliness, if they are unexpectedly reduced to concord with other dissonances. Symmetry is the same. Now from this it is clearly evident that harmony is the perfection of thinkability. For in the preceding corollary it was said that the more perfect is that in which there is more reality. But thinking is also a kind of reality, and so much the greater because things are multiplied in a certain way by thought, for individual minds contain some representation of the whole world. Hence a more perfect manner of thinking is where one act of thinking extends to many things simultaneously, for in this way there is more reality in that thought. This is done, however, with the help of relations, for a relation is a kind of unity in multiplicity. And kinds of relations are the connections and reasons of things among themselves, proportions and proportionalities. Harmony results from everything in a given object taken together. Therefore the more relations (the aggregate of which is harmony) there are in a thinkable object, the more reality, or what is the same, the more perfection there is in the thought. Therefore it follows

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that harmony is the perfection of thinkable things, insofar as they are thinkable.

The great axiom

There is nothing without a reason.

Or, what is the same, nothing exists without there being some reason that can be given (at least by the omniscient) why it exists rather than not, and why it is thus rather than otherwise. From which it follows that, in itself and absolutely speaking, nothing is indifferent, as the indifference of things is merely an invention of our ignorance, as too is what heathens called chance. But in truth, someone will say, if there is nothing without a reason then there will be no first cause and no ultimate end. We must answer that, indeed, there is nothing without a reason, but that does not mean that there is nothing without a cause. For a cause is the reason for a thing outside of the thing, or its reason of production, but it is possible that the reason for a thing is inside the thing itself. And this is the case in all those things which are necessary, like the truths of mathematics which contain their reason in themselves; likewise God, who alone is the actual reason for the existence of actual things.

Definitions

The will is the judgement concerning good and evil.

That men understand this definition of 'will' is apparent from their modes of expression, in which if the definition is substituted for the thing defined then the sense will be evident to them. Hence we say everyone seeks the good and avoids the bad. No one wants evil on the grounds that it is evil. We will what we think is good, and conversely what we think is good is what we will. If anyone rejects this notion of the will, he is using the term in a way that is different from the one which men are accustomed to, and perhaps he will not even be able to say what it is to will something.

Judgement is practical thought, or the thought together with the endeavour to act.

This is evidently the distinction between simple thought, or consideration, imagination, representation, and judgement, because he who has some judgement is ready to act in some manner which conforms to this

judgement. Whoever is persuaded that there is a fire in the furnace will certainly not insert his hand, as long as he is in control of his mind and his own actions. Whoever believes that he is the strongest and wisest critic of his own actions will certainly not sin as long as he has this judgement keeping watch within his mind. Hence it is clear that belief, i.e. a judgement, cannot exist without works, i.e. charity, or the attempt to do good works.

If anyone now substitutes the definition of 'judgement' in the definition of 'will', he will see that the will is the thinking about good and evil together with the endeavour to act; which agrees with the expression of those who say the will is the very last act of deliberation. For deliberation is an uncertainty, together with an inquiry, about the good and evil of some action or of some present omission. As long as we deliberate we are not yet ready to act; however when the inquiry and uncertainty are both over, only then have we established in earnest what we must do, and from that very moment onwards we endeavour to dispose ourselves and everything outside us for action.

But if anyone should prefer to say that the will is not the judgement of good and evil, but is the very endeavour to act which follows immediately from the judgement, I shall not dispute with him provided that he recognizes that the endeavour arises from the judgement. For an endeavour to act which does not originate from knowledge is irrational. Such is that endeavour to debase ourselves, which we feel in ourselves, not from a judgement of the mind, but from the burdensome nature of the body.

Even God discovers that some things are good, or better than others.

For God is endowed with will; the will is under the rule of the good.

Alternatively: every act of God is as a result of knowledge, every act as a result of knowledge is voluntary, every voluntary act is the cause of some good or evil.

Alternatively: some things are more perfect than others, as we have shown above; therefore they are more pleasant for the one who knows them (as God does), by the definition of pleasure. Therefore they are better, for the good is pleasant, or rather it contributes to what is pleasing.

Someone will say

God is the cause of things, and therefore is the cause of the goodness which is in them. Therefore his will is prior to the goodness of things.

The response is easy: God is the cause of the existence of things, but not of their essence, and to that extent he will also be the cause of the existence of the good, but not of the goodness which he discovers in the essence itself when thinking about it. In the same way God is the cause when some triangle exists, but he is not the cause of the nature of the triangle, nor of its properties. For instance it is absurd to say that God has given this privilege to the circle (i.e. to the figure having all outermost points equidistant from one middle point), that it is the most capacious of all the plane shapes of the same periphery (or which can be contained within the same circumference line). For it has this property because of its own nature, and the contrary implies contradiction. However if anyone says that God has given the circle its own nature, he surely doesn't know what he is saying. To what do I turn? To the circle itself. Therefore it is necessary that the circle is already something and endowed with a certain nature before anything is ascribed to it. So such things can be said, but they make no sense at all.

Moreover, if anyone insists that it follows from this that God is not the cause of everything, I shall answer that God is the cause of everything which exists outside himself, but not the cause of his own understanding, and hence not of the ideas exhibiting the essences of things, which are found in him.

Out of all the possible ways in which the universe or series of things is able to exist, one way is the most perfect, and that way is without doubt the one that really exists.

Given the most perfect being, namely God (as I now suppose), that the most perfect operation is that of the most perfect being, and that the world is the work of God, then the world is the most perfect, and hence no other series of things can be imagined which is more perfect than this one.

Alternatively: things have as much possibility as they have reality (for the essence of a rose in winter is the same thing as its possibility of existence) therefore those things that have the most possibility are without doubt those that exist in actuality, since they have the most reality, i.e. according to the definition of perfection they are the most perfect.

Alternatively: if this is not so, no reason can be given why this series of things should exist rather than any other. For certainly more series can be imagined, and it should not be thought that all possibles exist. For who would believe that no story can be imagined that will not have

existed somewhere, or is not going to exist? But from many series it is necessary that one stands out ahead of the others, otherwise why should that exist rather than any of the others? But it will stand out because of its perfection; and the more perfect will be chosen, because God, the author of things, is certainly the most perfect.

Alternatively: since something exists rather than nothing, it is necessary that something is contained in the essence itself, or the possibility from which actual existence follows, and hence reality or possibility possesses a certain propensity to exist. Hence when many possibles obstruct each other, or when they are not able to co-exist, the one which contains more of reality, i.e. the one which is the most perfect, will exist.

All these demonstrations, if anyone examines them with care, come back to the same thing: for they show that this total series of past, present and future things taken together was chosen by God ahead of other possibles, because the most perfect cannot fail to please the wisest being, and what has pleased the most powerful being cannot fail to exist.

Because certain possibles exist, when they were equally able not to exist, it follows that 'possibility' is a certain disposition to exist rather than not to exist.

It is rather like this: existing possibles must differ in some way from the non-existing ones, which is the reason why they exist rather than others. This distinction must consist in something very general, but the most general distinction of the possibles is their very degree of reality, or quantity of essence. In fact it seems that two general distinctions can be supposed: one is the quantity of reality, the other is the quantity of possibility; but it seems that the quantity of reality and possibility differ only as something reciprocal, for the less reality each thing has the easier it is to see this. However we shall rightly conclude as follows: since there is something rather than nothing, it is necessary that there is a greater reason for existing rather than not existing. Once this is assumed, a reason must be given why all things do not exist. Because this cannot happen, it follows that as many things as possible exist.

2. On the continuous increase in the perfection of the world (March 1689–March 1690?)¹⁴

All things considered, I believe that the world continuously increases in perfection and does not go around in a circle as if by a revolution, for thus

there would be no final cause. And although in God there is no pleasure, there is still in him something analogous to pleasure, so that he rejoices in the continuous advance of his plans. But there would be no pleasure, but torpor, if I remained in the same state, no matter how excellent. Happiness requires perpetual progress to new pleasures and perfections. Indeed all things are present to God as it were, and he embraces everything in himself. Nevertheless the execution requires time, and he did not have to achieve the greatest things immediately, otherwise there would be no more change, nor should they preserve the same perfection, otherwise there would be nothing further to achieve. The universe is similar to a plant or animal, in that it tends towards maturity. But this is the difference, that it never comes to the greatest degree of maturity, and also that it never goes back or falls into decline.

3. Whether the world increases in perfection (1694–1696?)¹⁵

The question is whether the whole world increases or decreases in perfection, or whether in fact it always preserves the same perfection, as I rather think, even if the different parts variously exchange perfection between themselves, so that it is mutually transferred. If the perfection of the world remains the same, some substances cannot continually increase in perfection without others continually decreasing in perfection. A substance increasing in perfection either increases continuously, or increases and decreases in turn, but only to the extent that it can be recognized to have increased more than it has decreased. If any substance progresses in perfection to infinity, whether directly or by interposed regressions, it is necessary that it can now be assigned a maximum degree of perfection below which it will never descend in the future, and in turn, after some time has elapsed, another degree of perfection can be assigned which is greater than the former. However it is not therefore necessary that the highest degree of ascent should always be moved forward. In which case it is necessary that the lowest degree of ascent within a given time, although it always moves forward, nevertheless attains a certain limit, or finally reaches the highest point of ascent, in which case the substance would then preserve the same degree of perfection forever. If the lowest degree at any time ceases to move forward, or at least has a limit beyond which it does not ascend, but the highest degree of ascent always moves forward, there is progress towards infinite perfection; but it is then perfect

when the lowest descent likewise has no limit, and there is no ascent beyond.

But if a substance descends to infinity below any degree whatever, and also ascends below any degree whatever, it will still be seen to ascend if it ascends more than it descends.

Shall we say that the world increases by a necessary power, because souls are influenced by everything in the past? For, as we have demonstrated elsewhere, no perfect oblivion is granted to souls; even if we do not remember distinctly, nevertheless the whole that we now perceive consists of parts, into which all preceding actions enter. So should souls always progress over time towards more clearly expressed thoughts? If it cannot happen that a perfection is given which cannot be increased, it follows that the perfection of the universe always increases; for thus it is more perfect than if it did not increase. Supreme happiness does not consist in a certain highest degree, but in the continuous increase of joy. The greatest being does not increase in perfection, because it is outside time and change and it includes the present and future equally.

4. Letter to André Morell (29 September 1698)¹⁶

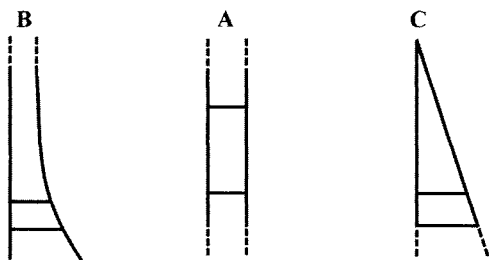
I am effectively of the opinion that God could not do better than he does, and that all the imperfections we think we find in the world only originate from our ignorance. We also do not have the right point of view to judge of the beauty of things. It is a bit like in astronomy, where the motion of the planets appears to be a pure confusion when one looks at it from the Earth, but if we were in the sun we would find before our very eyes this beautiful arrangement of the system which Copernicus has discovered by dint of reasoning. As the smallest bodies are, so to speak, small worlds full of marvellous creatures, we should not imagine that there are barren parts, absolutely speaking, even though they seem barren to us. But the fact is that we must consider that we are not the measure of things, especially in the state we are in at present. Sins themselves are only evil for those who sin, and absolutely speaking they increase the perfection of things, just as shadows are good in a painting in order to enhance the light. *Deus non permitteret malum, nisi majus bonum procuraret ex malo* [God would not permit evil unless he could procure a greater good from evil]. It even seems to me that these truths are so important that unless we fully understand them we can neither truly esteem nor truly love God, the indifference

attributed to him being absolutely incompatible with a perfect wisdom and goodness.

5. Letter to Louis Bourguet (5 August 1715)¹⁷

Two hypotheses can be formed, one that nature is always equally perfect, the other that it always increases in perfection. If it is always equally perfect, but in variable ways, it is more likely that it did not have a beginning. But if it always increases in perfection (supposing that it is not possible to give to it all its perfection at once) the matter could still be explained in two ways, namely by the ordinates of hyperbola B or by those of triangle C. According

to the hypothesis of the hyperbola, there would be no beginning, and the instants or states of the world would have been increasing in perfection from all eternity; but according to the hy-



pothesis of the triangle, there would have been a beginning. The hypothesis of equal perfection would be that of the rectangle A. As yet, I do not see a way of showing demonstratively by pure reason which of these we should choose. But even though the state of the world, taken in any instant whatever, could never be absolutely perfect according to the hypothesis of increase, nevertheless the whole actual sequence would not fail to be the most perfect of all those possible, because God always chooses the best possible.

6. Letter to Louis Bourguet (mid-to-late March 1716)¹⁸

The change of ordinates in the rectangle is always such that the posterior keeps the lines of the anterior, and it does not follow that this introduces an increase in perfection; for if there remains something of the preceding state, then something of it does not remain. Even if the universe were always equally perfect, it will never be sovereignly perfect, for it always changes and gains new perfections, although it loses some old ones. With regard to the hypothesis of the hyperbola, it does not follow either that what has no beginning necessarily exists, for it could always have been

voluntarily produced by the sovereign being. Thus it is not that easy to decide between the three hypotheses, and we must still engage in a lot of meditation in order to come to any conclusion about them.

7. Letter to Louis Bourguet (3 April 1716)¹⁹

As for the big question, if it is possible to demonstrate by reason which hypothesis, namely that of the rectangle, triangle or hyperbola, is preferable in the constitution of the universe, I believe that we would have to adhere to a rigorous argument in good form in order to decide . . .

You are right, Sir, to say that from the fact that finite beings are infinite in number it does not follow at all that their system must receive at the start all the perfection of which it is capable. For if this consequence was right, the hypothesis of the rectangle would be demonstrated.

I also believe that the result of that is truly infinite, and must not be compared to an infinite sequence of numbers whose sum is finite. But one infinity, to speak according to our capacity, is greater than another, for example, the sum of this series

$\frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{5}$ and so on to infinity

is infinite and surpasses every assignable number; but nevertheless the sum of this other series

$\frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{1}$ and so on to infinity

is infinitely greater than the previous one. Thus the perfection of the system, although infinite, would not for all that be the greatest possible, but would always approach it.

Ideas or essences are all founded on a necessity independent of wisdom, fittingness and choice; but existences are dependent on them.

Even if the rectangle has obtained, nothing produced by the eternal wisdom would be coeternal with it, since its productions always change. A necessary production must not be subject to any change.

Every state of the universe is always limited in perfection, even if the preceding state were to be equal in perfection to the subsequent one; for both together embrace more perfections than the one alone. It is also for that reason that change is appropriate, in order that there should be more

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kinds or forms of perfection, even if they would be equal in degree. Even so, in God the idea of the work always precedes the work; the present state of things was always known beforehand.

8. Letter to Louis Bourguet (2 July 1716)²⁰

If the rectangle has obtained in the order of things, we would have to admit that the productions of the divine wisdom would be coeternal with that divine wisdom, and that each substance would have been eternal with respect to what precedes it, just as I believe that they are all eternal with respect to what follows.