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The Leibniz-Wolffian Background

Moses Mendelssohn was a devoted disciple of the leading lights of the *Aufklärung*, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and Christian Wolff (1679–1754). From his discovery of their writings as a young man to his composition, near the end of his life, of what Immanuel Kant described as the “most perfect product” of the school to which he belonged, he remained within the Leibniz-Wolffian fold.¹ It is important, therefore, for our purposes, to clarify the extent of his loyalty to this school of thought, to elucidate the manner in which the teachings of Leibniz, Wolff, and their other disciples constituted the basis of his philosophy of religion.

Mendelssohn followed his mentors in placing paramount emphasis on the importance of rational proof for the existence of God, on an account of divine providence, and on demonstrations of the immortality of the human soul. It will accordingly be necessary for us to review, first of all, the manner in which these philosophers elaborated their major proofs for the existence of God. Then, to acquire an understanding of the roots of Mendelssohn’s concepts of providence and immortality, it will be necessary for us to examine, above all, the views expressed in Leibniz’s *Theodicy* and other related works. We will need to look, in addition, at the way in which Leibniz and Wolff and some of their disciples formulated their arguments in defense of the immortality of the soul, arguments of which Mendelssohn was later to make use.

Leibniz, Wolff, and their disciples all believed in the possibility of articulating a comprehensive natural theology; that is, a theology based on reason alone. They did not all maintain, however, that unassisted human reason was the only means of acquiring religious knowledge, or that it could provide knowledge of everything that human beings needed to know. Leibniz and Wolff both affirmed the truth of Christian revelation. They denied that revelation could include anything that contradicted the teachings

of reason, but they maintained at the same time that it could teach things that were “suprarational.” As we shall see, not all of their disciples followed them in drawing this distinction. All of them, including Mendelssohn, however, had to come to terms with their mentors’ Christian orthodoxy.

As a consequence of their acknowledgment of the truth of Christian revelation, Leibniz and Wolff affirmed, in addition to the tenets of natural theology, various revealed religious doctrines. For our purposes, it will not be necessary to clarify the nature of all of their specifically Christian teachings. To some degree, however, their Christian beliefs influenced their accounts of natural theology, especially their treatments of divine providence and immortality. To understand what they have to say with respect to natural theology, therefore, we will have to devote some attention to various aspects of their discussions of revealed theology. We will also have to consider the important transformation that takes place within the Leibniz-Wolffian school when some of its later representatives begin to present natural theologies free of any Christian coloration.

The Existence of God

According to Leibniz, “Our reasonings are founded on two great principles: that of *Contradiction* . . . and that of *Sufficient Reason*.”²² The first principle states that “of two contradictory propositions the one is true, the other false. . . .”²³ It is not, needless to say, Leibniz’s discovery nor does it require any explanation. By virtue of the latter principle “we consider that no fact can be real or actual, and no proposition true, without there being a sufficient reason for its being so and not otherwise, although most often these reasons just cannot be known by us.”²⁴ This principle, too, is far from abstruse, but it is not self-explanatory. In elucidating it, we shall see that it leads almost immediately to a proof for the existence of God.

The preceding definition of the principle of sufficient reason, taken from section 32 of the *Monadology*, alludes to two different kinds of truths, which Leibniz designates in the very next section of the same work as “those of *reasoning* and those of *fact*.” The former type of truths includes those that are necessary and the opposite of which is impossible; the latter type includes those that are not necessary and the opposite of which is possible. According to Leibniz, both types of truths require, as Nicholas Rescher has

put it, “a grounding rationale” for being the way that they are. In the case of truths of reasoning, “this validating sufficient reason is provided by the operation of the principle of contradiction in that the denial of such truths leads to contradiction.”⁵ The sufficient reason for the existence of contingent truths or truths of fact cannot be sought in their logical necessity but only through an examination of the things that cause them to be the way that they are. “Here,” however,

the resolution into particular reasons can go on into endless detail, because of the immense variety of things in nature and the *ad infinitum* division of bodies. There is an infinity of shapes and motions, present and past, that enter into the efficient cause of my present writing, and there is an infinity of minute inclinations and dispositions of my soul, present and past, that enter into its final cause.

A resolution that can “go on into endless detail” is clearly one that brings us “no further ahead.” Consequently, the sufficient reason for the existence of truths of fact “must lie outside of the entire sequence or *series* of this detail of contingencies, however infinite it may be.”⁶ It can only be “found in a substance which is the cause of this series or which is a necessary being bearing the reason for its existence within itself, otherwise we should not yet have a sufficient reason with which to stop. This final reason for things is called *God*.”⁷ Thus, the elucidation of the principle of sufficient reason turns quite quickly into a cosmological proof for the existence of God.

Leibniz also propounded his own version, or rather versions, of the ontological proof for God’s existence, which was still known in his day as the Cartesian proof. Descartes was of course not the originator of this method of proving God’s existence, which had first been developed by St. Anselm in the eleventh century. What Descartes had done was to revive it, following a period during which it had fallen into disrepute.⁸ Leibniz himself gratefully acknowledged the service Descartes had thereby performed; nevertheless, he was not entirely satisfied with the Cartesian version of the ontological proof.

The argument of Descartes was that God had to be thought of as being possessed of all the perfections. On the basis of this, and on the basis of the premise that existence is one of the perfections, he reasoned that it was part of God’s essence to exist. This argument, according to Leibniz,

is not fallacious, but it is an incomplete demonstration which assumes something which should also be proved in order to render the argument mathematically evident. The point is that it is tacitly assumed that this idea of a wholly great or wholly perfect being is possible and does not imply a contradiction.⁹

To complete what Jan Rohls has called his *improved ontological argument*, Leibniz believed that this assumption had to be proven.¹⁰

Leibniz, as Rohls has observed, “did not believe it to be self-evident that the concept of the most perfect or the absolutely necessary being was free of contradiction.” He thought, on the contrary, that it was entirely possible that this concept was just as laden with contradictions as those of the fastest movement or the greatest number (which can never be specified). To prove that the definition of God as the most perfect being was not a mere “nominal definition,” that is, a definition to which there is, in the real world, no corresponding object, but a “real definition,” it was necessary to show that it was logically possible for a being to be the most perfect of all beings.¹¹

The manner in which Leibniz did this, and thereby repaired the defect in Descartes’s argument, has been succinctly summarized by Stuart Brown. Leibniz, he writes, defined

a “perfection” as any “simple quality which is positive and absolute”, i.e. as a “simple form”. He invoked his Platonic atomism further by claiming that all such *simple* forms are compatible with one another in the same subject. Incompatibility can only occur as between complex qualities. Thus, for example, red and green would not be “simple forms” for Leibniz because a definition of them (in terms of primary qualities) would explain why one and the same thing cannot be both red and green (all over at the same time). The simple forms are logically independent of one another and hence can all inhere in one subject.

Thus, “by identifying God’s ‘perfections’ with the ‘simple forms’ Leibniz is able to claim that the notion of a most perfect being is possible . . .” And because existence itself is a perfection, the possibility of the existence of a most perfect being necessarily implies the real existence of such a being. Leibniz, as Brown puts it, thereby joins Descartes “in holding that it is part of God’s *essence* to exist.”¹²

As Rohls has noted, Leibniz considered this form of the ontological argument to be needlessly complicated. He therefore gave preference to the version of the argument that proceeded not from the concept of the most perfect being but from that of the necessary being.¹³ Here, too, his argument begins with a demonstration of the possibility of the being whose existence is to be established. In this case, however, the demonstration takes the form of a proof of the *impossibility* of the negation of the concept in question. "For if the negation of the proposition that God exists is impossible, since it contradicts the definition of God to say that God does not exist, then one can draw from the fact that it is possible that God exists the conclusion that God does exist."¹⁴ Leibniz's concept of possibility belongs, as Dieter Henrich has observed, to a metaphysics that "does not yet distinguish between the logical possibility of a thought and the real possibility of an existent being. A concept whose definition contains no contradiction is thereby already defined as real; the possibility of its object is assured."¹⁵

In addition to the cosmological proof and these different versions of the ontological proof Leibniz developed a number of other proofs for God's existence. In the *Monadology*, for instance, he includes an argument on the basis of the existence of eternal truths.¹⁶ Elsewhere he presents his own version of the physiotheological proof. He argues that the purposeful direction and pre-established harmony of the world serves as "one of the most effective and palpable proofs for God's existence."¹⁷ The cosmological and the ontological proofs are, however, the only ones that Mendelssohn accepted and further refined and are therefore the only ones of interest to us in the context of this study. Having outlined Leibniz's presentation of these proofs, we must now briefly consider how they were further developed in the writings of Christian Wolff as well as those of one of Wolff's students, Alexander Baumgarten.

In both his Latin and his German writings on metaphysics Wolff reiterated the cosmological proof for God's existence in the form that Leibniz had given it.¹⁸ In general, he left no doubt that he preferred the cosmological argument to all others. The ontological argument, in both of its principal forms, can be found only in his Latin works. He differs somewhat from Leibniz in the way in which he interconnects the cosmological and the ontological proofs, but since Mendelssohn does not follow him in this respect at all, there will be no need for us to look into this difference here.

What we need to note is one of Wolff's important linguistic usages, a term that Mendelssohn adopted from him. In his presentation of the ontological proof based on the idea of God as the most

perfect being, Wolff speaks of God as being possessed of all of the mutually compatible “realities” to the highest possible degree. By *realities* he means nothing other than what Leibniz referred to as *perfections*. In his ontological proof, he speaks of existence as a reality that God must possess.¹⁹

Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762), an important disciple of Wolff, is a figure whose name is today familiar only to those with a special interest in the German Enlightenment.²⁰ Among them, Baumgarten is remembered primarily for the originality of his ontology. The only aspect of that ontology of which it is necessary for us to take note has been conveniently summarized by Altmann. According to Baumgarten, he writes,

all that exists is totally (*omnimode*) determined, and the reverse is equally true: Everything that is totally determined exists. In the case of the most perfect being only essential or inner determinations can apply. Hence it is sufficiently determined by dint of its essence, and it either exists or is altogether indeterminate and impossible. Since it cannot be impossible, as has been shown, it necessarily exists.²¹

In the following chapter we will examine the way in which Mendelssohn made use of this formulation.

Providence and Immortality

From the idea of God as the most perfect or the necessary being Leibniz and Wolff derived knowledge of the divine attributes. In basically similar ways, they sought to show that the most perfect or necessary being must be independent, absolutely infinite, possessed of boundless understanding and infinite power, and so forth. We need not explore in detail the manner in which they proceeded from their fundamental premises to their doctrines of God, since the primary subject of our study, Moses Mendelssohn, neither reiterated what they said nor attempted to improve upon their efforts in this area.

This is not to say, of course, that we have no further interest in Leibniz’s and Wolff’s teachings with regard to natural theology. What we must investigate, however, is not the way in which they arrived at their understanding of God’s nature but the way in which they conceived God, as he was known through reason, to rule the world dependent upon him. In other words, we must ex-

amine their views concerning divine providence and the related principle of the immortality of the soul. The natural place to begin such an inquiry would be, it would seem, with Leibniz's *Theodicy*.

"The historical significance of Leibniz's philosophy of religion," as Henry E. Allison has written, "is based largely upon his *Theodicy* (1710)."²² In this well-known work, he elaborated his concepts of divine providence and grace, "which became generally adopted by the *Aufklärung*."²³ Frequently summarized, famously satirized by Voltaire, many of the main ideas expressed in the *Theodicy* are in all likelihood more familiar to contemporary readers than any other aspect of Leibniz's thought. It is primarily in this work, for instance, that he sets forth his frequently misunderstood and much-maligned theory that this world constitutes "the best of all possible worlds."

Leibniz expounds his concepts of divine providence and immortality not only in the *Theodicy*, however, but also in a number of other writings such as his *Causa Dei* (a "methodical abridgement" of the *Theodicy*) and his *Monadology*. We will have occasion to refer in this section to a number of these works. We should also repeat, at this point, that the *Theodicy* as well as several other of the writings to which we will be referring here combine philosophical reasoning with specifically Christian theological ruminations. While our concern, for the most part, is with the purely philosophical aspects of Leibniz's opus, we will, to a certain extent, have to examine the way in which his philosophical and his Christian convictions are interrelated.

Leibniz's cosmological and ontological proofs are designed to demonstrate God's existence. His account of divine providence, on the other hand, is intended not only to set forth his understanding of the way in which God rules the world but also to win the hearts of his readers. An omnipotent and infinitely good God has created, he seeks to show, the best of all possible worlds. There is, to be sure, much evil in this world—but it is not to be blamed on God himself. There is much less of it than people are accustomed to believe, and there exists a compensatory afterlife. The sight of what God has created, Leibniz says, ought to fill us with love for him.²⁴ Ultimately, however, he finds it difficult to describe the existing world in a way that will persuade his readers that this is the case. Christian doctrine concerning the afterlife, as we shall see, greatly complicates his task.

As Allison observed, Leibniz's teaching on divine providence was generally adopted by the *Aufklärung*. The later representatives of the German Enlightenment did not, however, adopt un-

questioning the views propounded by Leibniz in the *Theodicy* and in his other writings and subsequently restated by Wolff. They accepted the main points of Leibniz's philosophical understanding of divine providence, but they did not adjust it, as he had, to accommodate traditional Christian doctrines. As we shall see, abandoning these doctrines made it possible for them to overcome the difficulties that had beset Leibniz and to propound a view of divine providence better suited than that of Leibniz himself to meet the goals he was seeking to achieve.

In the early sections of the *Causa Dei*, the abridgement of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz outlines what he calls *preparatory knowledge*; that is, the knowledge on which a defense of divine providence is necessarily based. What he does here is, in essence, to elucidate the character of the altogether perfect being whose existence is known to us by virtue of the proofs we examined in the previous section of this study. Two dimensions of God's perfection, he explains, are his greatness and his goodness. The greatness of God has two main elements: his omnipotence and his omniscience. God's omnipotence is displayed by his absolute independence of everything outside of him as well as by the dependence on him of all things—the merely possible no less than the actual. God's omniscience comprehends everything that can ever become an object of the understanding. It therefore encompasses everything in this world, that which already exists as well as that which will come to pass.²⁵

"God," according to Leibniz, "is the primary center from which all else that exists emanates." He created the world *ex nihilo*. And this great creative act marks only the beginning of his activity. He ceaselessly sustains the world. The "created substances depend upon God who preserves them and can produce them continually by a kind of emanation just as we produce our thoughts."²⁶ For Leibniz, as Nicholas Rescher has put it, "God sustains the world by *thinking* of it in a particular sort of way." In affirming God's continual involvement in sustaining the world, however, Leibniz does not mean to suggest that he is forever tinkering with what he has created. As Rescher says,

while Leibniz assumes a God who is "on duty" twenty-four hours a day, every day, to assure THAT the world keeps on existing, he precludes an *intervening* God who readjusts WHAT is going on. The course of world history is settled by a once-and-for-all creation-choice and there is no possibility and no need of God's having any "second thoughts" on the matter. In

the correspondence with Samuel Clarke, Leibniz emphatically and scornfully rejects any idea of a “hands-on” God who needs to readjust or rewind the universe on the pattern of an imperfect clockmaker who has made a defective timepiece.²⁴

Needless to say, a Christian thinker like Leibniz cannot reject the possibility of direct divine intervention in the world’s affairs without explaining how such a theory can be reconciled with the occurrence of the biblical miracles. Leibniz does so in the *Theodicy*, where he urges his readers to “bear in mind that the miracles which happen in this world were also enfolded and represented as possible in this same world considered in the state of mere possibility, and God, who has since performed them, when he chose this world had even then decreed to perform them.”²⁵ Because he views the miracles as events woven into the divine plan from the very outset, Leibniz has no need to modify his overall theory to account for their possibility.

Following his treatment of the power of God, in the *Causa Dei*, Leibniz turns to a discussion of divine goodness. God’s goodness, he writes, represents a perfection of his will. Unlike an imperfect will, which may have a merely apparent or a lesser good as its object, the divine will always aims at the *best*. This *best* does not include all the goods that receive the approval of God’s *antecedent will*, for it is not possible for all good things to coexist. God therefore selects those goods that make up the greatest possible sum of perfections, and his *consequent will* brings them into existence. This selection is called the *decree* of God.

Leibniz defines *providence* as the combination of God’s goodness and greatness, which manifests itself in the creation and preservation of the entire universe. He defines *divine justice* as the combination of God’s goodness and greatness “in the special government of substances endowed with reason.”²⁹ Providence leads, he maintains, to the coming into being of what must be considered to be the best of all possible worlds. This is something that, in his opinion, one could ascertain a priori, without even casting a glance at what lies before our eyes. One knows this to be the case “since God has chosen this world as it is.”³⁰ For Leibniz it is, then, possible to arrive at a theoretically unimpeachable vindication of providence without giving any attention at all to its actual operations. *Whatever* exists is by definition the best.

Leibniz does not, however, leave the matter at that. He seeks on a number of occasions to elucidate more precisely what it is that makes this world the best of all those that God could possibly have

created. "It follows from the supreme perfection of God," he writes, for instance, in his *Principles of Nature and of Grace, Founded on Reason*:

that he has chosen the best possible plan in producing the universe, a plan which combines the greatest variety together with the greatest order; with situation, place, and time arranged in the best way possible; with the greatest effect produced by the simplest means; with the most power, the most knowledge, the greatest happiness and goodness in created things which the universe could allow . . .³¹

Here and in some other passages it almost seems as if "the best of all possible worlds" is tantamount to the world stocked most plentifully and in the most orderly fashion with possible things. But this is not quite the case. We do not really begin to grasp the meaning of Leibniz's most famous phrase until we pose the question that John Hick used as the heading for one of the subsections concerning Leibniz in the chapter entitled "Eighteenth Century Optimism" in his book *Evil and the God of Love*: "'Best Possible'—For What Purpose?" The short answer to this question, supplied by Hick, is that the best world is "that which best serves the purpose that God is seeking to fulfill by means of it."³² But, as Hick himself recognizes, this only begs another question: What was that purpose?

According to Leibniz, God brought the world into being for the sake of his own glory. "In designing to create the world," he "purposed solely to manifest and communicate his perfections in the way that was most efficacious and most worthy of his greatness, his wisdom and his goodness."³³ At first glance, this may seem to identify as God's purpose something that far transcends the concerns of the world's inhabitants. Yet if God's self-manifestation is the purpose of creation, it is obvious that those beings who are capable of receiving divine communications and appreciating God's glory will play a central role in the whole divine scheme of things. These beings Leibniz identifies in the *Monadology* as the rational souls or spirits (*esprits*). He describes them as constituting, among other things, "images of divinity itself—of the very Author of nature." In all of creation they are the only beings "capable of knowing the system of the universe, and of imitating it to some extent through constructive samples, each spirit being like a minute divinity within its own sphere."

Not only do these spirits resemble the divinity, but they are "capable of entering into a kind of community with God" that Leib-

niz designates as the City of God. This city "is a moral world within the natural world, and is the most exalted and the most divine of the works of God. And it is in it that the glory of God truly consists, for there would be none at all if his grandeur and goodness were not known and admired by the spirits."³⁴ Leibniz's contention, then, that God created the world for the sake of his own glory is one that is far from relegating the spirits, a category that includes human beings, to a secondary place in the entire divine plan. They are in fact indispensable for the enhancement of God's glory.

What lends the spirits their importance is their rationality, their ability to know the system of the universe and, as a result, to love its Creator. This love of God constitutes, in turn, "the greatest good and interest" of rational souls,

For it gives us a perfect confidence in the goodness of our Author and Master, and this produces a true tranquility of the spirit. . . . It is true that the supreme happiness . . . cannot ever be full, because God, being infinite, cannot ever be known entirely. Thus our happiness will never consist, and ought never to consist, in complete happiness, which leaves nothing to be desired and which would stupefy our spirit, but in a perpetual progress to new pleasures and new perfections.³⁵

Because spirits "are of all substances the most capable of perfection," God "who in all things has the greatest perfection will have the greatest care for spirits and will give not only to all of them in general, but even to each one in particular the highest perfection which the universal harmony will permit."³⁶

As Leibniz states in the *Theodicy*, "the happiness of intelligent creatures is the principal part of God's design, for they are most like him." This statement is immediately subjected, however, to an important qualification. Leibniz does not see how one can prove the happiness of intelligent creatures to be God's "sole aim."³⁷ For

God has more than one purpose in his projects. The felicity of all rational creatures is one of the aims he has in view; but it is not his whole aim, nor even his final aim. Therefore it happens that the unhappiness of some of these creatures may come about by concomitance, and as a result of other greater goods.³⁸

One cannot help but be puzzled by what Leibniz says here. After all, what greater good could there be? He never identifies one. He

does tell us that God's *sole* purpose in creating the world was "to manifest and communicate his perfections in the way that was most efficacious and most worthy of his greatness, his wisdom and his goodness." This communication is the cause of the happiness of all of his rational creatures. How, then, can there be a greater good than their happiness, one whose implementation would sometimes result in their experiencing unhappiness or even in the failure of some of them ever to experience happiness?

The key to understanding this passage lies, it seems, in Leibniz's statement that "in the "City of God" God sought to bring about as much "virtue and happiness as is possible."³⁹ It is not, in fact, for the sake of the accomplishment of some other good that rational creatures must endure unhappiness. Their sufferings are, rather, an unavoidable result of God's creation; even the best of all *possible* worlds is not devoid of such flaws. Why not? Why is it not possible for an omnipotent God to create a world in which there would be no impediments to the complete fulfillment of the principal part of his design? The answer to these questions, Leibniz would say, cannot be known. All we can know is that this world is the best of all those that are possible, for God would otherwise not have chosen to create it. And this world evidently is one in which some rational souls must suffer unhappiness.

In creating the best of all possible worlds, Leibniz acknowledges, God has brought into being a world in which not only unhappiness but also a considerable measure of evil is to be found. He devotes a great deal of effort to accounting for existing evils in a way that both exculpates God of any responsibility for them and minimizes their extent. Leibniz has a dual purpose here: he seeks to defend the principle of God's absolute goodness, and he also attempts to depict the results of the "best possible plan," which God has implemented in a manner that will instill in his readers a love of God.

According to Leibniz, God's will is divided not only into an antecedent will and a consequent will, but also into a productive will and a permissive will. The productive will has reference to God's own actions, the consequent will to the actions of other beings. The permissive will has as its object not the actions themselves but merely the permission to engage in them. In spite of its perfection and its attachment to the best, the divine will is not absolutely opposed to the existence of all things that are less than good. It may permit evils to come into being.⁴⁰

All evils are divided into (1) metaphysical evils, (2) physical evils, and (3) moral evils. Metaphysical evils are the restrictions on

metaphysical goods; that is, inanimate, animate, and rational things. Conceiving of these evils causes pain and displeasure. Pain and displeasure are themselves physical evils. Moral evils occur when the will of a rational being is set in motion by something that has the false appearance of a good. Its natural consequence is physical evil.

None of these evils can ever be the object of God's will, that is, his antecedent will, which encompasses the perfections of things in general as well as the happiness and the virtue of all intelligent substances.⁴¹ On the other hand, God's consequent will, or his decree, does not simply prevent all evils from coming into being. For sometimes the avoidance of a particular evil would have the result of obviating the occurrence of a greater good.⁴²

Metaphysical and physical evil may serve as means for the attainment of higher goods; this can never be true, however, of moral evil. One may never commit a bad deed in the hope that good will come out of it. Nevertheless, moral evil can sometimes be an indispensable precondition for the attainment of a greater good or the avoidance of a greater evil. God, therefore, while never committing a moral evil, will, when he has reason to do so, permit such evils to take place.⁴³

God's productive will is never responsible for the commission of any evil, but God's permissive will may permit evils to occur, including the moral sins of rational beings. But why? To answer this question, Leibniz, resorts to an analogy between God and human beings. Human beings have, under certain circumstances, a moral duty to permit evils to take place. This is the case, namely, when the prevention of a given evil would entail the commission of a still greater evil. Much the same thing can be said of God. If God had chosen to create a world in which he had prevented sin from coming into being, he would have created a world inferior to the existing world and would thereby have acted in a manner unbefitting his own perfection. He would have chosen to bring into existence a world that was not the best of all possible worlds.⁴⁴ One might, in short, imagine a world in which there was no sin, but it would not be a better world than the one that exists. Thus, the presence in the world of moral evil in no way impugns the goodness of God.

There are, however, those for whom the abundance of physical evils in this world calls into question the existence of divine providence. Leibniz responds to their complaints by observing that (1) most of these evils are men's own fault and (2) we are insufficiently grateful for the benefactions we receive from God and de-

vote more of our attention to the evils that befall us than we do to the good that we enjoy incessantly. For those who are upset by what they regard as the unjust distribution of goods in this world, he has a different answer. First, he observes that all the afflictions in this world cannot be compared with the glory of the future life. Second, he maintains that the suffering that we undergo here on earth has its useful purposes; it is a necessary precondition for our happiness in this world and the next.

For Leibniz, then, the complete vindication of providence requires reference to the rewards obtainable in the afterlife. That all rational souls are immortal and proceed, following death, to another life is something that he believes reason to be capable of demonstrating. The precise nature of this afterlife, however, is something he considers to be entirely beyond the purview of reason, something that only revelation can illuminate. In his attempt to reconcile the tendency of his own thought with authoritative, revealed teachings concerning the life after death, Leibniz, as we shall see, runs into some rather serious impediments.

Leibniz's understanding of the immortality of the soul is bound up with his idea of the soul as a *monad*. To grasp what he has to say concerning immortality, however, it is not necessary to enter into any extensive consideration of precisely what it is he means by this term. It should suffice to note that he defines *monads* as "the true atoms of nature and, in a word, the elements of things." Monads, he states, "can neither come into being nor end save all at once; that is, they can begin only by creation and end only by annihilation."⁴⁵ All monads have *perceptions* and *appetites* in a sense that Leibniz explains but that for our purposes it will not be necessary to clarify.⁴⁶ Souls differ from other monads in that their "perception is more distinct and accompanied by memory."⁴⁷

Simply by virtue of its identity as a monad the soul, "that mirror of an indestructible universe, is indestructible . . ."⁴⁸ In addition,

It follows from the perfection of the supreme Author not only that the order of the entire universe is the most perfect possible, but also that each living mirror which represents the universe according to its own point of view, that is each *monad* or each substantial center, must have its perceptions and its appetites regulated in the best way compatible with all the rest. From this it also follows that souls, that is to say, the most dominant monads, or rather animals themselves, cannot fail to awake from the state of stupor into which death or some other accident may place them.

“Rational souls,” Leibniz likewise asserts, “are exempt from everything which might make them lose the quality of citizens of the society of minds, since God has provided so well that no changes in matter can make them lose the moral qualities of their person-ality.”⁴⁹

Rational souls retain their former identities even after their death. They remain forever members of the “City of God.” This is the limit, however, of what unassisted human reason can determine. “As far as the particulars of this condition of the human soul after death are concerned and in what way it is exempted from the transformation of things, revelation alone can give us particular instruction; the jurisdiction of the reason does not extend so far.”⁵⁰

To complete his teaching on immortality, therefore, Leibniz must have recourse to Christian revelation. This teaches him that some souls will ultimately attain blessedness in the afterlife. Like nearly all of his contemporaries, however, he understood the Christian tradition to teach that “the number of men damned eternally will be incomparably greater than that of the saved.”⁵¹ He notes at one point that some of the Fathers of the Church thought otherwise and sought to deny eternal damnation or greatly to reduce the number of those who will suffer it. He himself does not believe, however, that it is possible to take refuge in their “unacceptable opinions.”

His adherence to the received Christian doctrine concerning the afterlife creates great problems for Leibniz. In his vindication of divine providence he sought, as we have seen, to eliminate any grounds for doubting God’s goodness on account of the evils found in this world. In response to those who would question divine providence on the basis of the injustices prevalent in our world, Leibniz argues, as we have seen, that all the afflictions here below cannot be compared with the glory of the future life. He maintains that the sufferings that we undergo on earth serve as a necessary precondition for our happiness in this world and the next. But, it must be asked, is not the significance of this afterlife vitiated by the fact that so few human beings are destined to enjoy it?

The generally accepted Christian teaching creates another, more profound problem as well. In our examination of Leibniz’s understanding of God’s purpose in creating the world we saw that the rational souls or spirits were the chief object of God’s concern. Because spirits “are of all substances the most capable of perfection,” God “who in all things has the greatest perfection will have the greatest care for spirits and will give not only to all of them in general, but even to each one in particular the highest perfection

which the universal harmony will permit." He says, furthermore, that "the happiness of intelligent creatures is the principal part of God's design, for they are most like him." Granted, there are limits to the amount of happiness that it is possible for him to extend to intelligent creatures. But can these limits really be so confining? If even "the best possible plan" entails the damnation of most human beings, how can Leibniz really expect his readers to love the being responsible for its implementation?

Leibniz is not oblivious to these difficulties. In view of the dismal posthumous fate of most human beings, he ultimately acknowledges, the next world does not seem to provide much of a remedy for the harshness of this one. For it is possible to object "that there too the evils outnumber the goods, since the elected are very few."⁵² In response to this complaint, Leibniz is prepared to suggest that it is possible that the glory of the blessed is great enough in the eyes of God to outweigh the sufferings of all the damned.⁵³ At greater length, however, and with greater fervor, he proposes another solution:

Today, whatever bounds are given or not given to the universe, it must be acknowledged that there is an infinite number of globes, as great as and greater than ours, which have as much right as it to hold rational inhabitants, though it follows not at all that they are human. . . . It may be that all suns are peopled only by blessed creatures, and nothing constrains us to think that many are damned. . . . Moreover, since there is no reason for the belief that there are stars everywhere, is it not possible that there may be a great space beyond the region of the stars? Whether it be the Empyrean Heaven, or not, this immense space encircling all this region may in any case be filled with happiness and glory. It can be imagined as like the Ocean, whither flow the rivers of all blessed creatures, when they shall have reached their perfection in the system of the stars.

In comparison to these vast regions, our globe and its inhabitants are "almost lost in nothingness." And "since all the evils that may be raised in objection before us are in this near nothingness, haply it may be that all evils are almost nothingness in comparison with the good things which are in the universe."⁵⁴ Any objections to divine providence based on the great number of the damned are, therefore, founded on ignorance.⁵⁵

As we have noted, Leibniz sought to achieve two principal

goals in his discussion of divine providence. He attempted, first of all, to explain God's governance of the universe. But he also sought to do so in a manner that would redound to God's glory, that would fill his readers with a sense of admiration and love for their Creator. After reviewing his overall theory, we can say that it attains the first of Leibniz's goals by providing a comprehensive, consistent account of the way in which God has implemented a plan for accomplishing his own purposes. It describes God as having brought the world into being primarily to promote his own glory through benefactions to its rational inhabitants, by extending to them the greatest possible degree of perfection and happiness. It explains, in addition, why there are of necessity certain limits to the extent of these benefactions, why even the best of all possible worlds must inevitably contain certain evils, perhaps even a surplus of evils. To attain the second of Leibniz's goals, however, it is necessary for his theory to go beyond mere self-consistency. It must portray God in a way that renders him worthy of love.

Leibniz seems to think that he has done so. He claims to have shown "that the world is governed in such a way that a wise person who is well informed will have nothing to find fault with and can find nothing more to desire."⁵⁶ He maintains, beyond this, that his account of divine providence provides a basis for loving God, that "it is easy to love him as we ought of we know him as I have said."⁵⁷ But he seems also to be aware that this may be difficult for people to accept.

In the end, Leibniz can complete his defense of the goodness of God's overall plan only by referring to the afterlife, where the injustices of this world are supposedly redressed. It appears, however, that his only reliable source of knowledge concerning the afterlife, biblical revelation, tells him of a realm where the evils still seem vastly to outnumber the goods, at least as far as human beings are concerned. If so, how can people regard their Maker with love in their hearts? To deal with this problem, Leibniz is forced to suggest that in God's eyes the eternal damnation of the vast majority of human beings may be of relatively little significance. Alternatively, and, it seems, with more conviction, he has recourse to some rather strange ruminations regarding human beings' hypothetical coinhabitants of the universe who—again, hypothetically—enjoy greater happiness than they do. These peculiar notions may restore the *possibility* of a universe in which goods outnumber evils, but it is difficult to believe that they could suffice to nurture people's love for the God who may have created it.

The principal problem Leibniz faces is, then, one that has its

roots not in what reason teaches concerning the nature of God and the world but in the contents of divine revelation. God, our reason teaches, wants all rational souls to be happy, and “puts this purpose into execution as far as the general harmony will permit.” Only to a rather limited extent do considerations relating to the general harmony of things on earth stand in the way of the fulfillment of this divine purpose. Metaphysical, physical, and moral evils undeniably abound here below. But there is no *philosophical* reason why these evils could not all be supposed to find their remedies in the afterlife, where all human beings could be allowed, in accordance with God’s purposes, to resume their progress toward perfection and happiness—like the denizens of Leibniz’s fanciful extraterrestrial realm, of whom “nothing constrains us to think that many are damned.” Unfortunately, however, such a supposition is rendered impossible, for Leibniz, by a Christian dogma he apparently feels bound to accept as authoritative.

Whether Leibniz truly believed in the eternity of punishment for any souls at all is open to doubt. In his *New Apology for Socrates, or Investigation of the Doctrine of the Salvation of Heathens* (Berlin, 1772), a work attacking the doctrine of eternity of punishment, Johann August Eberhard maintained that Leibniz privately rejected this doctrine but nevertheless propounded it publicly because he was attempting “to accommodate his views to the teaching of the various religious parties in order to win popularity for his system. Thus, he was forced to find a sense in which the doctrine of the eternity of punishments is reconcilable with the best of all possible worlds.”⁵⁸ More recently, Leo Strauss, too, has argued that “Leibniz did not really believe in eternal damnation, as it was understood by Christian tradition.”⁵⁹ Fortunately, it is not necessary for us to attempt to determine here whether Eberhard and Strauss were correct in their assumptions. Our concern is not with what Leibniz may have secretly believed but with what he publicly taught and the impact his teachings had on his disciples, including, above all, Moses Mendelssohn.

Despite the fact that he did not really believe in the Christian doctrine of eternal damnation, Leibniz, according to Strauss, had no real difficulty accommodating himself to it. “For Leibniz,” he writes, “the purpose of creation is primarily the beauty and order of the world in its entirety . . .” Consequently he sees all suffering as being “basically justified in the context of the universe . . .”⁶⁰ Here, I believe, Strauss has misinterpreted Leibniz’s position. For Leibniz, as we have seen, God’s primary purpose in creating the world is not the establishment of order and beauty for their own

sake but self-glorification through the *communication* of knowledge of himself and his creation to his rational creatures, who themselves derive happiness from this knowledge. It is therefore rather awkward for him to have to deal with the fact, taught by divine revelation, that the preponderant majority of rational creatures known to us, that is, human beings, are destined not to perfection and happiness but to eternal damnation. It is, indeed, because he cannot escape this fact that Leibniz is forced to modify his statement that "the happiness of intelligent creatures is the principal part of God's design" with the qualification that it is not his "sole aim." For if it were, one would evidently have to say that he had sabotaged his own efforts, at least as far as the preponderant majority of the human race is concerned.

Nothing constrains us to believe, Leibniz argues, that damnation will be the lot of any of the rational souls dwelling (perhaps) beyond the stars. And, he must have believed, if it were not for the prevailing interpretation of the New Testament, there would be nothing to constrain us to believe that most inhabitants of the earth face such a fate. Neither would there be, in the absence of this teaching, any need to hypothesize the existence of multitudes of unknown, happy beings in order to be able to credit God with the creation of a world in which the goods outnumber the evils. Were it not for the standard Christian doctrine, nothing indeed would have prevented Leibniz from affirming that God's sole purpose in creating the world was to reveal his glory to his rational creatures and that God, in his infinite goodness, makes sure that all rational creatures, including all human beings, ultimately make their way to an afterlife where they experience "perpetual progress to new pleasures and new perfections." Once they were prepared to discard the old Christian teaching, this is in fact what Leibniz's disciples were, if they wished, free to maintain.

A considerable amount of time had to pass, however, before any of them was prepared to take such a step. Wolff, in his discussion of divine providence and immortality, essentially reiterated the teachings of Leibniz. As Thomas P. Saine has observed,

there is scarcely any significant difference between the fundamental ideas of Leibniz's *Theodicy* and Wolff's statements concerning God, the world, and the soul in the *German Metaphysics*. What Leibniz dealt with, however, only partly and in the form of answers to various objections of Pierre Bayle against the possibility of justifying the God of revealed religion by means of reason, Wolff brought into the framework of

a comprehensive system and lent the form of an unshakably solid structure of thought.⁶¹

Nevertheless, as Saine himself has noted, there are some respects in which Wolff's treatment of divine providence and immortality diverges from that of Leibniz. Unlike Leibniz, Wolff confines himself to a consideration of matters that can be learned through reason alone. He distinguishes, we should note, in much the same way as Leibniz between rational truths and suprarational truths. The former, he says, "we know through reason, the latter through Holy Scripture." Rational truths belong to the province of philosophers (*Weltweisen*); suprarational truths are the concern of theologians (*Gottes-Gelehrten*). "Whoever wishes to pass judgment on both at once must be at once a philosopher and a theologian."⁶² Wolff does not wish to be such a person and aspires only to be a philosopher. To the extent that he concerns himself with theology it is with natural theology, which, despite its name, constitutes a branch of philosophy and consists only of the knowledge of God obtainable through unassisted reason.

Wolff himself, as Saine puts it, respected the boundaries between philosophy and theology, "and he did not permit himself to criticize the doctrines of the church. On the contrary, he repeatedly affirmed his own orthodoxy, as he understood it—though he never tried to define it."⁶³ Still, even in the course of discussing purely philosophical matters, Wolff did not refrain from saying things that called into question the degree to which he truly accepted traditional Christian teachings. Unlike Leibniz, but in a manner fully consistent with the basic tenor of Leibniz's thought, he displayed a desire to downplay as far as possible the significance of the occurrence of miraculous, divine interventions in the natural order of things. His evident uneasiness regarding this question as well as some of his statements with respect to revelation brought Wolff into unsought conflict with the orthodox theologians of his day.⁶⁴

For the most part, however, in his treatment of divine providence, Wolff steered clear of such problems. "In general," as Saine puts it, he "faithfully followed the Leibnizian line of thinking: in the doctrine of the best of all possible worlds, in the assertion that God cannot prefer the imperfect to the perfect," and in other, related matters as well. What marks his discussion of divine providence is, to quote Saine one last time, the fact that "For Wolff, theodicy is practically a self-evident matter . . ." Leibniz had settled everything, and "Wolff is not inclined, in so far as theodicy is concerned, to think any further. He is in general very conservative in his attachment to traditional, Christian-moral teachings."⁶⁵