

Leibniz, From *Theodicy* 405-417

This Dialogue of [Laurentius] Valla and his books on Pleasure and the True Good make it plain that he was no less a philosopher than a humanist. These four books were opposed to the four books on the Consolation of Philosophy by Boethius, and the Dialogue to the fifth book. A certain Spaniard named Antonio Glarea requests of him elucidation on the difficulty of free will, whereof little is known as it is worthy to be known, for upon it depend justice and injustice, punishment and reward in this life and in the life to come. Valla answers him that we must console ourselves for an ignorance which we share with the whole world, just as one consoles oneself for not having the wings of birds.

I thought it would be opportune to quote it in abstract, retaining the dialogue form, and then to continue from where it ends, keeping up the fiction it initiated; and that less with the purpose of enlivening the subject, than in order to explain myself towards the end of my dissertation as clearly as I can, and in a way most likely to be generally understood.

Antonio: I know that you can give me those wings, like another Daedalus, so that I may emerge from the prison of ignorance, and rise to the very region of truth, which is the homeland of souls. The books that I have seen have not satisfied me, not even the famous Boethius, who meets with general approval. I know not whether he fully understood himself what he says of God's understanding, and of eternity superior to time; and I ask for your opinion on his way of reconciling foreknowledge with freedom.

Laurent: I am fearful of giving offence to many people, if I confute this great man; yet I will give preference over this fear to the consideration I have for the entreaties of a friend, provided that you make me a promise.

Antonio: What?

Laurent: It is, that when you have dined with me you do not ask me to give you supper, that is to say, I desire that you be content with the answer to the question you have put to me, and do not put a further question.

Antonio: I promise you. Here is the heart of the difficulty. If God foresaw the treason of Judas, it was necessary that he should betray, it was impossible for him not to betray. There is no obligation to do the impossible. He therefore did not sin, he did not deserve to be punished. That destroys justice and religion, and the fear of God.

Laurent: God foresaw sin; but he did not compel man to commit it; sin is voluntary.

Antonio: That will was necessary, since it was foreseen.

Laurent: If my knowledge does not cause things past or present to exist, neither will my foreknowledge cause future things to exist.

Antonio: That comparison is deceptive: neither the present nor the past can be changed, they are already necessary; but the future, movable in itself, becomes fixed and necessary through foreknowledge. Let us pretend that a god of the heathen boasts of knowing the future: I will ask him if he knows which foot I shall put foremost, then I will do the opposite of that which he shall have foretold.

Laurent: This God knows what you are about to do.

Antonio: How does he know it, since I will do the opposite of what he shall have said, and I suppose that he will say what he thinks?

Laurent: Your supposition is false: God will not answer you; or again, if he were to answer you, the veneration you would have for him would make you hasten to do what he had said; his prediction would be to you an order. But we have changed the question. We are not concerned with what God will foretell but with what he foresees. Let us therefore return to foreknowledge, and distinguish between the necessary and the certain. It is not impossible for what is foreseen not to happen; but it is infallibly sure that it will happen. I can become a Soldier or Priest, but I shall not become one.

Antonio: Here I have you firmly held. The philosophers' rule maintains that all that which is possible can be considered as existing. But if that which you affirm to be possible, namely an event different from what has been foreseen, actually happened, God would have been mistaken.

Laurent: The rules of the philosophers are not oracles for me. This one in particular is not correct. Two contradictories are often both possible. Can they also both exist? But, for your further enlightenment, let us pretend that Sextus Tarquinius, coming to Delphi to consult the Oracle of Apollo, receives the answer:

Exul inopsque cades irata pulsus ab urbe.
A beggared outcast of the city's rage,
Beside a foreign shore cut short thy age.

The young man will complain: I have brought you a royal gift, O Apollo, and you proclaim for me a lot so unhappy? Apollo will say to him: Your gift is pleasing to me, and I will do that which you ask of me, I will tell you what will happen. I know the future, but I do not bring it about. Go make your complaint to Jupiter and the Parcae. Sextus would be ridiculous if he continued thereafter to complain about Apollo. Is not that true?

Antonio: He will say: I thank you, O holy Apollo, for not having repaid me with silence, for having revealed to me the Truth. But whence comes it that Jupiter is so cruel towards me, that he prepares so hard a fate for an innocent man, for a devout worshipper of the Gods?

Laurent: You innocent? Apollo will say. Know that you will be proud, that you will commit adulteries, that you will be a traitor to your country. Could Sextus reply: It is you who are the cause, O Apollo; you compel me to do it, by foreseeing it?

Antonio: I admit that he would have taken leave of his senses if he were to make this reply.

Laurent: Therefore neither can the traitor Judas complain of God's foreknowledge. And there is the answer to your question.

Antonio: You have satisfied me beyond my hopes, you have done what Boethius was not able to do: I shall be beholden to you all my life long.

Laurent: Yet let us carry our tale a little further. Sextus will say: No, Apollo, I will not do what you say.

Antonio: What! The God will say, do you mean then that I am a liar? I repeat to you once more, you will do all that I have just said.

Laurent: Sextus, mayhap, would pray the Gods to alter fate, to give him a better heart.

Antonio: He would receive the answer:

Desine fata Deum flecti sperare precando.
He cannot cause divine foreknowledge to lie.

But what then will Sextus say? Will he not break forth into complaints against the Gods? Will he not say? What? I am then not free? It is not in my power to follow virtue?

Laurent: Apollo will say to him perhaps: Know, my poor Sextus, that the Gods make each one as he is. Jupiter made the wolf ravening, the hare timid, the ass stupid, and the lion courageous. He gave you a soul that is wicked and irreclaimable; you will act in conformity with your natural disposition, and Jupiter will treat you as your actions shall deserve; he has sworn it by the Styx.

Antonio: I confess to you, it seems to me that Apollo in excusing himself accuses Jupiter more than he accuses Sextus, and Sextus would answer him: Jupiter therefore condemns in me his own crime; it is he who is the only guilty one. He could have made me altogether different: but, made as I am, I must act as he has willed. Why then does he punish me? Could I have resisted his will?

Laurent: I confess that I am brought to a pause here as you are. I have made the Gods appear on the scene, Apollo and Jupiter, to make you distinguish between divine foreknowledge and providence. I have shown that Apollo and foreknowledge do not impair freedom; but I cannot satisfy you on the decrees of Jupiter's will, that is to say, on the orders of providence.

Antonio: You have dragged me out of one abyss, and you plunge me back into another and greater abyss.

Laurent: Remember our contract: I have given you dinner, and you ask me to give you supper also.

Antonio: Now I discover your cunning: You have caught me, this is not an honest contract.

Laurent: What would you have me do? I have given you wine and meats from my home produce, such as my small estate can provide; as for nectar and ambrosia, you will ask the Gods for them: that divine nurture is not found among men. Let us hearken to St. Paul, that chosen vessel who was carried even to the third heaven, who heard there unutterable words: he will answer you with the comparison of the potter, with the incomprehensibility of the ways of God, and wonder at the depth of his wisdom. Nevertheless it is well to observe that one does not ask why God foresees the thing, for that is understood, it is because it will be: but one asks why he ordains thus, why he hardens such an one, why he has compassion on another. We do not know the reasons which he may have for this; but since he is very good and very wise that is enough to make us deem that his reasons are good. As he is just also, it follows that his decrees and his operation do not destroy our freedom. Some men have sought some reason therein. They have said that we are made from a corrupt and impure mass, indeed of mud. But Adam and the Angels were made of silver and gold, and they sinned notwithstanding. One sometimes becomes hardened again after regeneration. We must therefore seek another cause for evil, and I doubt whether even the Angels are aware of it; yet they cease not to be happy and to praise God. Boethius hearkened more to the answer of philosophy than to that of St. Paul; that was the cause of his failure. Let us believe in Jesus Christ, he is the virtue and the wisdom of God: he teaches us that God wills the salvation of all, that he wills not the death of the sinner. Let us therefore put our trust in the divine mercy, and let us not by our vanity and our malice disqualify ourselves to receive it.

This dialogue of Valla's is excellent, even though one must take exception to some points in it: but its chief defect is that it cuts the knot and that it seems to condemn providence under the name of Jupiter, making him almost the author of sin. Let us therefore carry the little fable still further. Sextus, quitting Apollo and Delphi, seeks out Jupiter at Dodona. He makes sacrifices and then he exhibits his complaints. Why have you condemned me, O great God, to be wicked and unhappy? Change my lot and my heart, or acknowledge your error.

Jupiter answers him: If you will renounce Rome, the Parcae shall spin for you different fates, you shall become wise, you shall be happy.

Sextus: Why must I renounce the hope of a crown? Can I not come to be a good king?

Jupiter: No, Sextus; I know better what is needful for you. If you go to Rome, you are lost.

Sextus, not being able to resolve upon so great a sacrifice, went forth from the temple, and abandoned himself to his fate. Theodorus, the High Priest, who had been present at the dialogue between God and Sextus, addressed these words to Jupiter: Your wisdom is to be revered, O great Ruler of the Gods. You have convinced this man of his error; he must henceforth impute his unhappiness to his evil will; he has not a word to say. But your faithful worshippers are astonished; they would fain wonder at your goodness as well as at your greatness: it rested with you to give him a different will.

Jupiter: Go to my daughter, Pallas, she will inform you what I was bound to do.

Theodorus journeyed to Athens: he was bidden to lie down to sleep in the temple of the Goddess. Dreaming, he found himself transported into an unknown country. There stood a palace of unimaginable splendour and prodigious size. The Goddess Pallas appeared at the gate, surrounded by rays of dazzling majesty.

Qualisque videri

Coelicolis et quanta solet.

[In the guise and grandeur in which she is wont

to appear before the denizens of heaven (Virgil, *Aeneid*, II, 591-592).]

She touched the face of Theodorus with an olive-branch, which she was holding in her hand. And lo! he had become able to confront the divine radiancy of the daughter of Jupiter, and of all that she should show him. Jupiter who loves you (she said to him) has commended you to me to be instructed. You see here the palace of the fates, where I keep watch and ward. Here are representations not only of that which happens but also of all that which is possible. Jupiter, having surveyed them before the beginning of the existing world, classified the possibilities into worlds, and chose the best of all. He comes sometimes to visit these places, to enjoy the pleasure of recapitulating things and of renewing his own choice, which cannot fail to please him. I have only to speak, and we shall see a whole world that my father might have produced, wherein will be represented anything that can be asked of him; and in this way one may know also what would happen if any particular possibility should attain unto existence. And whenever the conditions are not determinate enough, there will be as many such worlds differing from one another as one shall wish, which will answer differently the same question, in as many ways as possible. You learnt geometry in your youth, like all well-instructed Greeks. You know therefore that when the conditions of a required point do not sufficiently determine it, and there is an infinite number of them, they all fall into what the geometers call a locus, and this locus at least (which is often a line) will be determinate. Thus you can picture to yourself an ordered succession of worlds, which shall contain each and every one the case that is in question, and shall vary its circumstances and its consequences. But if you put a case that differs from the actual world only in one single definite thing and in its results, a certain one of those determinate worlds will answer you. These worlds are all here, that is, in ideas. I will show you some, wherein shall be found, not absolutely the same Sextus as you have seen (that is not possible, he carries with him always that which he shall be) but several Sextuses resembling him, possessing all that you know already of the true Sextus, but not all that is already in him imperceptibly, nor in consequence all that shall yet happen to him. You will find in one world a very happy and noble Sextus, in another a Sextus content with a mediocre state, a Sextus, indeed, of every kind and endless diversity of forms.

Thereupon the Goddess led Theodorus into one of the halls of the palace: when he was within, it was no longer a hall, it was a world,

Solemque suum, sua sidera norat.

[A sun of its own it knew, and stars of its own.]

At the command of Pallas there came within view Dodona with the temple of Jupiter, and Sextus issuing thence; he could be heard saying that he would obey the God. And lo! he goes to a city lying between two seas, resembling Corinth. He buys there a small garden; cultivating it, he finds a treasure; he becomes a rich man, enjoying affection and esteem; he dies at a great age, beloved of the whole city. Theodorus saw the whole life of Sextus as at one glance, and as in a stage presentation. There was a great volume of writings in this hall: Theodorus could not refrain from asking what that meant. It is the history of this world which we are now visiting, the Goddess told him; it is the book of its fates. You have seen a number on the forehead of Sextus. Look in this book for the place which it indicates. Theodorus looked for it, and found there the history of Sextus in a form more ample than the outline he had seen. Put your finger on any line you please, Pallas said to him, and you will see represented actually in all its detail that which the line broadly indicates. He obeyed, and he saw coming into view all the characteristics of a portion of the life of that Sextus. They passed into another hall, and lo! another world, another Sextus who, issuing from the temple, and having resolved to obey Jupiter, goes to Thrace. There he marries the daughter of the king, who had no other children; he succeeds him, and he is adored by his subjects. They went into other rooms, and always they saw new scenes.

The halls rose in a pyramid, becoming even more beautiful as one mounted towards the apex, and representing more beautiful worlds. Finally they reached the highest one which completed the pyramid, and which was the most beautiful of all: for the pyramid had a beginning, but one could not see its end; it had an apex, but no base; it went on increasing to infinity. That is (as the Goddess explained) because amongst an endless number of possible worlds there is the best of all, else would God not have determined to create any; but there is not any one which has not also less perfect worlds below it: that is why the pyramid goes on descending to infinity. Theodorus, entering this highest hall, became entranced in ecstasy; he had to receive succour from the Goddess, a drop of a divine liquid placed on his tongue restored him; he was beside himself for joy. We are in the real true world (said the Goddess) and you are at the source of happiness. Behold what Jupiter makes ready for you, if you continue to serve him faithfully. Here is Sextus as he is, and as he will be in reality. He issues from the temple in a rage, he scorns the counsel of the Gods. You see him going to Rome, bringing confusion everywhere, violating the wife of his friend. There he is driven out with his father, beaten, unhappy. If Jupiter had placed here a Sextus happy at Corinth or King in Thrace, it would be no longer this world. And nevertheless he could not have failed to choose this world, which surpasses in perfection all the others, and which forms the apex of the pyramid. Else would Jupiter have renounced his wisdom, he would have banished me, me his daughter. You see that my father did not make Sextus wicked; he was so from all eternity, he was so always and freely. My father only granted him the existence which his wisdom could not refuse to the world where he is included: he made him pass from the region of the possible to that of the actual beings. The crime of Sextus serves for great things: it renders Rome free; thence will arise a great empire, which will show noble examples to mankind. But that is nothing in comparison with the worth of this whole world, at whose beauty you will marvel, when, after a happy passage from this mortal state to another and better one, the Gods shall have fitted you to know it.

At this moment Theodorus wakes up, he gives thanks to the Goddess, he owns the justice of Jupiter. His spirit pervaded by what he has seen and heard, he carries on the office of High Priest, with all the zeal of a true servant of his God, and with all the joy whereof a mortal is capable. It seems to me that this continuation of the tale may elucidate the difficulty which Valla did not wish to treat. If Apollo has represented aright God's knowledge of vision (that which concerns beings in existence), I hope that Pallas will have not discredibly filled the role of what is called knowledge of simple intelligence (that which embraces all that is possible), wherein at last the source of things must be sought.