André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval
Explanation of a paradox concerning the real existence of the same body in several places (11 November 1756)

Foreword

I fear, gentlemen, that a doubt arises in your minds about whether the subject I announce might be too much related to theology and consequently prohibited from our assemblies. The truth is that it is about the theological view you all think about as well as conversations with a famous theologian, and about dogmas and miracles. However, the piece you will hear is nonetheless philosophical, and purely philosophical, in my view. As you know, the manner is what counts. Scriptural passages, decisions of Councils or Synods, authorities of Fathers or doctors of the Church: this is theology. No authorities, not even those of the greatest philosophers, but simple reasoning, based on the nature of things; insight and an overwhelming obviousness: this is good philosophy. Moreover, that a shrewd turn, which seems at first sight to lend itself to superstition, tends only to strike it a harsher blow at the moment of so-called triumph, is a philosophical merit that not everything most generally recognized as belonging to philosophy has the good fortune of displaying.

In the third part of my Memoirs (printed at The Hague in 1749), there is a piece about which many have asked me for an explanation. I have never refused it in person. I was likewise asked to communicate it to the public, as something whose peculiarity is not unworthy of the public’s attention, but till now I have not done so, rather because the opportunity was lacking than on account of any difficulty doing so; for we will see that it would not have cost me much. It has never happened that I have given the slightest clarification to someone – in France, Switzerland, Holland, and Berlin – without having convinced him.

Before relating the rather long piece in question, I must first say to whom I am speaking in the memoir from which it is drawn. It is to Mr Auguste Jean Buxtorf, Pastor of Basel, who acquired over me the rights of a true father by a notable act of generosity, the detail of which can be read in the second part of these memoirs, addressed not to Mr Buxtorf but to a gentleman of very distinguished merit called Mr d’Eschische, of the Canton of Vaud. It was in his house that I composed the third part, a circumstance necessary for understanding what follows. In this third part, after explaining what had happened in my mind from the age of seventeen, both in relation to religion and the general and fundamental principles of our knowledge, I place eight letters I wrote in 1735 to the famous Jesuit Father Tournemine on the dogma of Transubstantiation and that of the real presence in different places. Then I indicate the subject matter of the remaining twenty or so, some amusing, others very serious. About the last four or five, I say on page 320 onwards:

I threw myself into a rather profound metaphysics, to examine whether it is possible, in one sense at least, for a body to exist in several places at once.

It was a famous miracle that brought me back to this matter. You understand, Sir, that it is natural for Jesus Christ to have no privilege that he does not share with the people of his society. Consequently, the Jesuits strongly claim the right to be double, and to multiply themselves on Earth in this way. After seeing them increase everywhere, maybe there is something in that. Alas! As Aesop’s frog says, is one not enough? Be that as it may, read the Life of François Xavier, one of their famous

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1 Prémontval’s note: ‘Read at the Academy, 11 November 1756. See what was said about this, book 1, p.337.’ That is, read at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres in Berlin.

2 Probably a reference to the fable ‘The frogs’ complaint against the Sun’: ‘Once upon a time the Sun was about to take to himself a wife. The Frogs in terror all raised their voices to the skies, and Jupiter, disturbed by the
founders, and you will find, as a fact attested in all the Indies, that one Easter day this
great saint simultaneously performed the functions of missionary in two places,
several days away from each other.³ Father Tournemine having advised (I am
ashamed for his memory) that by this domestic example he wanted to somehow prove
to me the possibility of existence in various places, instead of amusing myself
contest ing the fact, which is refuted by the testimony of those who give it to us, I took
the matter from a very different angle, through which I had the pleasure of causing
him much surprise.

My thought, Sir, more extensive, better developed, is what was due to make
the subject of my last letters. In what it consists, I shall tell you in very few words: but
also I will cause you more astonishment than to the Reverend Father, without being
able to satisfy here the curiosity I will pique, and perhaps I will even risk discrediting
myself in the minds of more than one reader... I undertake to prove that there is a
sense in which the real presence of a body in different places can be conceived very
easily. This will undoubtedly constitute a subversion of the ordinary laws of the
physical world. It is certain that we will have to regard it as a great miracle; a miracle
equal, if you will, to that of stopping the Sun in its course, or of resuscitating a dead
person. But I maintain that this miracle would not in any way run counter to the
eternal truths that God cannot violate... So, then, I claim that, if it pleased God, I
could for instance, Sir, have the good fortune of conversing with you all day long in
Basel tomorrow, on January 14th, and yet be found throughout the same day at
Échichens, alongside my very dear patron. I would give you both, at the same time,
fitting demonstrations of my affection (of course, my heart could suffice, which
would be another miracle, which I leave aside here). In sum, I would be present to
both in such a way that, in all rigour, it would be true that I had been as much in Basel
as in Échichens and as much in Échichens as in Basel.

Supposing that I succeed in establishing this possibility, does it not seem that
it is everything the dogma of the Roman Church would require? ...⁴ However, and this
is the height of the paradox, my explanation cannot be of any use to this Church,
which besides is very little concerned with it. Very simple is he who imagines he
would please her by bringing back her doctrine to the level of reason by hap

touche s! I would rather suspect that anyone who has the art of discovering new
incomprehensibilities would be less far away from displeasing her. In short, it is very
certain that, one way or another, my explanation does not suit her.

But also, you will doubtless tell me along with many others, this amazing,
wonderful explanation: is it not purely chimerical? I admit, Sir, that you are bound to
think so. It is the risk I anticipated of offering here only a simple statement of the
thing without entering into proof. Frankly, promises such as this one ought not to be
made unless their fulfillment follows shortly after, and it would have been better had I
remained silent on the subject of my last letters. What to do? Shall I, in order to obtain
some credence, swear to you that after all I would only have to put my thought in a

noise, asked them what they were croaking about. They replied, “The Sun is bad enough even while he is single,
drying up our marshes with his heat as he does. But what will become of us if he marries and begets other
³ In the Life of François Xavier it is indeed claimed that he was in two places at the same time: ‘Then was it
known that, by an astonishing manifestation of divine power, Francis had been present, whether in the body or
out of the body they knew not, but really and personally present, in two places at one and the same time.’ Life of
S. Francis Xavier (London: Burns, Oates & Washburne, 1881), 147.
⁴ Prémonval’s note: ‘I point out that I am shortening this piece considerably, and that I am removing or
softening some features which would have been less fitting in an academic lecture than in my Memoirs; among
others, what concerns the Lutheran dogma concerning the real presence etc.’
proper light and then it would cease to appear so strange to you? If I were to add that it is even of those things about which there is no longer any dispute once they are understood, it would be nothing but the strict and pure truth. But instead of just pointlessly increasing the reader’s disbelief, I think it will be best to break off by restricting myself to telling you the effect I had the satisfaction of producing on the mind of Father Tournemine.

The Reverend Father at first laughed at my paradox. He had scarcely wanted to understand me. I had to be talking nonsense: my deep meditations had gone to my head, and I ought to be carried to the madhouse for making assertions of such a nature. What? To agree on the possibility of the real existence in several places and not to want the Roman Church to authorize it in the dogma of the Eucharist! ‘Ah!’, he exclaimed, ‘for once here are mysteries more amazing than those your proud reason refuses to admit.’ And what shocked him, revolted him, scandalized him to the utmost degree, what pushed his patience almost to the limit, is what I stated at the beginning, that I completely set aside the difficulties of Transubstantiation and spoke absolutely only of the real presence in the sense that Catholics understand it. Indeed, there is no one who must not feel how much this clause makes my assertion more surprising.

While the Reverend Father was for a long time quite furious, in the end, however, I got him to listen to me. I can swear to you as a man of honour, Sir, that as soon as I had presented a certain point of view, I saw it noticeably strike him. His attention became more fixed: he no longer appeared to grant it to me only with regret, more out of impatience to see how I would disentangle the new ideas I had aroused in him. Soon, his penetration anticipating what remained for me to say, he did not let me finish: he smiled, and confessed to me that he gave up. After having mused a while, he gave me this speech, an unambiguous testimony of both his surprise and conviction.

‘My friend’, he said to me, ‘let the soundness of this remarkable idea not make you any more vain! Far from you having to become more intractable with regard to our holy mysteries, it is a motive to submit yourself, which I do not doubt the goodness of heaven gives to you. Do you see that what appears unreasonable often appears so only because it is not considered properly? You rebel against all existence in various places, and lo, today you nonetheless establish one in an incontestable way. Yet what a paradox have you just put in such a demonstrative light! Who will not agree that it seems at first much more incomprehensible than the very dogma of the Roman Church? So draw from that, young man’, he went on, ‘draw from that this useful lesson, that a God at least, if he wanted, could make you see the possibility of this same dogma, which you treat so openly as absurd and contradictory.’

‘Ah! My father’, I replied, ‘beware of Pyrrhonism! You are putting me on the road to it, take care. Why must most of your arguments lead only there?’

This is the piece, by which many of my readers have been struck, as they should be. Those who have read it without heeding it are truly strange readers. For those who have looked at it as only pure extravagance have surely done me a double injustice. I am not known as either mad or a liar, and I would have to be both if there was not some sort of truth here. It is therefore a matter of justifying my judgement and my sincerity. I must explain how, and in what sense, it is possible for one and the same body, in the same space of an hour, for example, to be present, and really present, as much in Paris as in Rome and as

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5 This is taken from Prémontval’s *Memoires d’André Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, Professeur en Mathematiques et Belles-Lettres* (The Hague: n.p., 1749), 320-327 (though as he notes, some parts were omitted).
much in Rome as in Paris. And the thing must be so obvious that there are no dissenters. It must be imagined that a man like Reverend Father Tournemine, and so many other persons to whom I have spoken about this since him, could have surrendered at once as it was explained. The matter is so simple that I am ashamed to begin it without a short preliminary I have scarcely failed to employ whenever I have been brought to this subject.

At a meal where Christopher Columbus was present, Spanish Lords jealous of his glory feigned to belittle his discovery of the New World. [They said:] “Nothing simpler than to think that the other hemisphere should not be devoid of continents. Who should not think that?” The man from Genoa, without appearing at all piqued, takes an egg. “Gentlemen”, said he, “I propose to you all, as many as you are, an easy thing, which is to make this egg stand up on its end on this plate. If nobody manages it, I’ll do it myself.” Many try hopelessly to balance a body with a smooth and curved surface on an even more polished and flat surface. All give up. Columbus takes the egg, breaks the end, and making a large base for it...6 ‘Ah! Is there a great marvel here?’, exclaimed one. ‘Who would not do the same?’ Yes, gentlemen, but he had to imagine it.

There is something similar in what we are going to see. Columbus, in proposing to make an egg stand on its end, did not specify whether it should be whole or broken. The expressions I use are not indifferent either. Although very correct and very exact, they nevertheless do not present to the reader’s mind absolutely the same meaning as they do to mine. Such a synonymous expression, which one would think could be substituted, would disturb everything. What I mean is indeed wonderful, but possible; what the reader understands by it is impossible with the utmost impossibility:

The same body, in the same space of an hour, and of the same hour, will be present, and really present, as much in Paris as in Rome and as much in Rome as in Paris.

What meaning can these words have other than the one they seem to present? ... ‘Hold on. Perhaps it means that the body having existed for the first half hour in one of these cities is miraculously transported in the twinkling of an eye to the other city, where it spends the second part of the whole hour. It will have been as much in Paris as in Rome and as much in Rome as in Paris, and will have been so during this hour...’ No. You are not there. It would be worse than the broken end [of the egg], and what I mean has more subtlety. Besides, I add that the body will not cease to be seen in both cities for the whole hour. ‘Ah! will not cease to be seen, that is to say, it will appear; but will it be there in the entire hour?...’ I have nothing to answer you... ‘Good! It is because God will substitute the image of the body during the half-hour of its absence...’ You are not there. I add that what I say of the hour, I say of each quarter of an hour, of each minute, and of each second, if you will. There are none in which the body had not been as much in Paris as in Rome and as much in Rome as in Paris. And to

6 Prémontval is here referring to the (probably apocryphal) story told in Benzoni’s History of the New World (1565): ‘Columbus being at a party with many noble Spaniards, where, as was customary, the subject of conversation was the Indies: one of them undertook to say: —“Mr. Christopher, even if you had not found the Indies, we should not have been devoid of a man who would have attempted the same that you did, here in our own country of Spain, as it is full of great men clever in cosmography and literature.” Columbus said nothing in answer to these words, but having desired an egg to be brought to him, he placed it on the table saying: “Gentlemen, I will lay a wager with any of you, that you will not make this egg stand up as I will, naked and without anything at all.” They all tried, and no one succeeded in making it stand up. When the egg came round to the hands of Columbus, by beating it down on the table he fixed it, having thus crushed a little of one end; wherefore all remained confused, understanding what he would have said: that after the deed is done, everybody knows how to do it; that they ought first to have sought for the Indies, and not laugh at him who had sought for it first, while they for some time had been laughing; and wondered at it as an impossibility.’ Girolamo Benzoni, History of the New World, trans. W. H. Smyth (London: Hakluyt Society, 1857), 17.
complete the defeat of conjectures, listen carefully: I add further that there will be absolutely no miraculous illusion.

“We surrender…” Well, there will be no miraculous illusion, but there will be a very physical and very common one. The miracle will consist only in a fast and alternative transfer from one place to another. You have glanced the explanation; you only needed one step. There is no one who has not noticed what happens to a torch that a lackey moves very quickly, or even better, to a burning coal whirled about in a slingshot. We know that a large circle of light appears. Although the coal is perhaps not the hundredth part of the circumference it traces, and consequently is absent from each point ninety-nine percent of the time against one per cent where it is present, nevertheless the instant of its presence at each point cannot be distinguished from the ninety-nine instants of its absence. This is because the impression an object’s presence makes on the eye always lasts a little longer than its presence: and if the swiftness of its motion brings the object back before the impression has ceased, a new impression is made, and so on, from which results a continuous vision, part apparent and part real. But for all that it must be noted that the movement must not be too rapid. If it is too rapid, the passage of the object at each point of its path, far from leaving an impression in the eye, does not make one even at the moment of its presence. The object will not be seen. A cannonball is not seen for this reason. A slingshot whirled around at the same speed would disappear, instead of making visible the circle it describes.

Suppose then, my Reverend Father, I said to the famous Jesuit; suppose that while I am here in Paris with your reverence, God transports me to Rome at the feet of the Holy Father, in a movement infinitely faster than that of the cannonball, which everyone admits is possible. God leaves me there for the same time the stone of a slingshot resides in each point of the circle it traces. He brings me back here at the same speed and keeps me in your presence for the same time as I was in the presence of the Holy Father; and again and again, over the course of an hour. Neither the Holy Father nor you have lost sight of me for a single moment during this hour. The speed of my course will be too great to leave any traces on your organs; you will not see me in motion, neither in your room nor in the air. The time of my presence, although perhaps much smaller than a hundredth of a second, will nevertheless cause an impression strong enough to last until my return, like that of the stone in the slingshot. It will be true to say that during the whole hour I will literally have been as much in Paris as in Rome and as much in Rome as in Paris, but not that I will have been in Rome and Paris the whole hour. What illusion there is will be only a physical and very common illusion, and the miracle will consist only in a rapid transportation which is not at all contradictory.

Your good St. François Xavier will have, if you will, appeared in this way, on the same day and at the same time, in Kochi, Surat, Goa, Calicut, Visapur, Japan, and in Europe. But I defy the Roman Church to make use of this idea. It is evident that she has only ever understood a continuous presence of the body of Jesus Christ, not an intermittent presence; and in the shackles she has put herself, she would no longer be free to go along with this explanation, even if she wanted to.

The rest of the conversation, related to what is read in my Memoirs, would be too out of place here, gentlemen. In the absence of any theological use, let us look for a use of another kind. Father Tournemine’s subtle reflection furnishes me with it. ‘Motive to submit yourself, young man’, he said to me, ‘and become less intractable about our mysteries!’ Young man! Yes! This young man, by applying his mind, discovers a ground of striking truth, in what at first appeared only an impertinent assertion. Therefore he ought to submit himself to all the fancies that are thrown at him. Because he seems not to have poor eyesight, he ought to shut his eyes! While it may be in the interest of such and such doctrines to reason in this way, I find it hard to believe that it is the interest of the truth. This here is precisely the inverse of the ordinary argument of the Pyrrhonians, and for the inverse of a very false
argument this one is no better. ‘To whom’, they say, ‘to whom has it happened that he discovers only error where he had thought he saw only what was obvious? So you have to assume mistakes everywhere, and even within the obvious.’ Whereas the Jesuit said, ‘You discover the light of truth where you thought you saw only palpable falsehood. So what appears to you to be a palpable falsehood ought to earn your submission and your respect in advance.’ But how much more common is it to find only errors under what are called incontestable truths than to find real truths hidden under absurd appearances? For this reason, the Reverend Father’s consequence is much more vicious than that of the Pyrrhonian. A just temperament is that of a universal examination; not only universal, continuous. To examine what seems true; to examine what seems false; to listen to everything; to probe everything; to do only that one’s entire life: this is the method of the sage. It is not that of the Pyrrhonian, nor of the sectarian, stubborn in his so-called orthodoxy. The doctor in a state of incredulity exempts you from the examination; it is time lost. The doctor in a state of credulity, almost everywhere forbids you the examination. Close your eyes, believe. In some places, you are allowed it; oh, the rare effort! You are exhorted to do it, but on the condition that the examination will not distance you from certain received canons by even a finger’s breadth. If it does distance you from them, you are a peculiar, dangerous man, a disrupter of society. ‘Examine’, you are told, ‘but do not probe. Be careful not to go too far, that is, further than us.’ It is only a reckless man who probes the abysses; he loses himself there. Of course, whoever upsets rigorous orthodoxy in some small way will be the reckless man who has probed the abysses, who wanted to penetrate impenetrable mysteries, who called God to the tribunal of his puny reason, who wrecked his faith on the reefs of an insane philosophy, and other commonplaces of the declamators of all countries. Let us always probe freely. To probe is to examine, and there is no praiseworthy belief without a deep examination. The only recklessness is to affirm of God something on hearsay or on the faith of another, whoever he may be. But that I affirm, or deny, or declare that I know nothing about it: if it is after having studied it as closely as I am capable, how will I be more reprehensible in one way than the other? I open my eyes, I look, I say with sincerity what appears to me; I look again, and give a new account that is just as faithful: I look as long as I have eyes; and as long as I have a language, it is expressed according to my heart. The supreme truth is offended only by deception; it applauds my sincerity, and has nothing but pity for my efforts when they do not work out.

Enough of these reflections, gentlemen; I will have too much opportunity to return to them. I want to close by tackling a small problem that has been raised regarding the main part of my paradox. No one disputes me at all if the thing happens out in the open air, but it is said that behind closed doors the impenetrability of bodies renders it impracticable. Not at all. No penetration will occur. The miracle is always reduced to transfers and displacements as rapid as needed, which no one denies possible. What prevents the door from opening and closing, a part of the wall from being opened up and closed up again, or the house itself from being

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7 Prémontval’s note: ‘Lelio Socinus, uncle of Faustus, never thought about forming a sect; but while those who did form it spoke only of examination, he also examined, and ingenuously proposed his doubts to those he thought fit to solve them. This nonetheless displeased that great reformer Calvin, who wrote to him as a friend: ‘I told you, and repeat it to you, my opinion is serious: cure yourself of this itching after investigation or I fear unfortunate consequences for you.’ Thus this man, who changed the religion of Europe without a divine mission, and who did not find that Luther, Zwingali, and many others had made enough innovations; this same man called ‘itching after investigation’, any examination that did not lead to the conclusions of his side. It is useless to stir up the ashes of Servetus; this failing is great enough, and ought to make those who still display the same spirit feel ashamed.’ Prémontval here refers to Calvin’s letter to Socinus: ‘What I warned you of long ago, I must again seriously repeat, that unless you correct in time this itching after investigation, it is to be feared you will bring upon yourself severe suffering.’ John Calvin to Lelio Socinus, 1551, in Letters of John Calvin, trans. Jules Bonnet, 4 vols. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 1: 331.
lifted up in an imperceptible moment? Parenthetically, I ask many learned interpreters of scripture: who has told them that it was not in this way that the resurrected Jesus Christ appeared among his disciples? By telling us that the doors were closed, the sacred writer seems to indicate a true miracle. But what miracle? Was there a penetration, properly speaking, of the whole solid body of Jesus Christ with a similarly solid part of the wall? Or does the body of Jesus Christ have the property of sometimes making itself tangible, as it was for the disciples, and sometimes fluid enough to seep through the pores of a wall, like the vapour of quicksilver through an iron chest when there is gold inside that attracts it? Or, finally, was there only a simple instantaneous displacement of a part of the wall? We have to see the systems that the commentators of various sects have built on the first two hypotheses, without thinking of the third. They will explain to you the nature of a glorified body; it will be wonderful. For they probe, these gentlemen! and God knows how. A strange probe, which has both superstition and blind curiosity for guides! We shall probe too, with their favour and out of love of the truth. We shall probe even the most hollow fancies, though we shall find there the opportunity to discredit powerful errors: the use ennobles everything. The nature of miracle, of prophecy, of mystery, of theism and polytheism etc., will provide us with unexpected observations. We shall see what buildings have been erected on a ground truly worthy of our respect.

There is a fourth way of explaining the entry of a body in a perfectly enclosed place, without penetration, without seeping through the pores, and without displacement of the walls. And it is really bad! This way, I say, is possible according to the principles of all known philosophies, except the Leibnizian. We do not even need to suppose with Descartes that God can change the essences of things. Leaving essences what they are (please listen to the proposition, and if it appears to you ridiculously absurd, judge from that the merit of the philosophies in whose principles it is demonstrated), the 1728 cubic inches of a cubic foot, enclosed within a cubic surface that we shall suppose impenetrable along with every cubic inch, can move in all directions there, so that there are none that preserve the same distances between them: they can stray and return, all at the pleasure of the supreme mover, or chance if one does not admit a supreme mover. Will it be the despair of the Newtonians, Epicureans, Gassendists, and other supporters of the void? For it is particularly on their principles, much more than on those of the Cartesians, that the thing is demonstrable, and demonstrable not as merely possible by a miracle, but as a law of nature more essential than the void is in their systems.

Gentlemen, I will explain myself on this subject in a piece that will be entitled *Void for Void, or Leap for Leap,* against the partisans of absolute space, the void, attraction etc. But it will not be for some time. There are more important prejudices that require our attention before those.

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8 Prémontval’s note: ‘There is yet another difficulty which naturally arises, and which I have anticipated from the very wording of the paradox, if one is mindful of it (above, page 217, towards the bottom), on what concerns thought, and the expression of thought, in the midst of these alternative transfers. But as it is well understood that I am not seriously interested in the double preaching of the Jesuit F. Xavier, it is not worth saying how I explain the rest. I kept my word on the multiplicity of presence and that is enough.

9 This piece was never written.