Leibniz: Notes on Bayle’s Dictionary, article ‘Paulicians’ (1702)

This piece comprises Leibniz’s own critical reading notes on one article from Pierre Bayle’s Historical and Critical Dictionary. The text is sometimes obscure and difficult to follow, which may be due to Leibniz writing at times almost in a kind of shorthand, though there may be another reason. The editor of the text, Louis-Alexander Foucher de Careil, notes that Leibniz’s handwriting in the manuscript is ‘small and difficult to read’, and it is quite possible that because of that de Careil’s transcription is faulty in places (though it must be said that de Careil is not a particularly reliable editor even when working with very neat manuscripts). Any faults in the transcription will of course be carried over to the translation. The piece itself largely consists of summaries of Bayle’s views followed by Leibniz’s own comments. To make the text easier to follow, I have italicized Leibniz’s comments and placed them within brackets.

[FC p179]

Mr Bayle recognizes, in accordance with Holy Scripture, that there is only one principle, namely a good principle. But he holds that it is impossible to respond to the difficulties about the cause of evil. Lactantius responds that by removing the evil one would remove the good. ‘If evils were removed, wisdom would also have to be removed, and no vestiges of the truth would remain.’ Mr Bayle replies that this response is pitiful and full of errors, that theologians say that if Adam had not sinned he would have been happy, and that man was only subject to physical evil because he renounced wisdom. According to Lactantius, the good angels would be without wisdom. One can enjoy good without having experienced evil. (But I think it can) always be maintained that, if evil had not been permitted, the good would not have been so great. Even if there would have been no incarnation, it is certain that God made the best. The small reasons against do not enter into the calculations at all when universal harmony is concerned. Without sin we ourselves would not exist. There would be other creatures.

1 ‘the way in which evil was introduced under the government of a sovereign, infinitely good, infinitely holy, and infinitely powerful being is not only inexplicable, but also incomprehensible.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary art. ‘Paulicians’ note E, pp168-9. When quoting Bayle, I use Richard Popkin’s English translation Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

2 This passage, from Lactantius’ On God’s Anger XIII, is also quoted by Bayle. Leibniz misquotes it, however; the passage should read ‘If evils were removed, wisdom would also have to be removed. No trace of virtue would remain, since virtue consists in bearing with and overcoming the pains of evil.’

3 ‘But the answer of Lactantius is pitiful. It is not only weak, but it is full of errors... Does it not overthrow all that the theologians tell us about the joys of paradise and the state of innocence? They tell us that in that happy state Adam and Eve felt, without any admixture of discomfort, all the pleasures available to them in the garden of Eden... The theologians add that if they had never sinned, they and all of their descendants would have enjoyed this happiness without ever being subject to diseases or sorrows, and without either the elements or the animal kingdom ever being unkind to them... It is so far from being the case that virtue and wisdom cannot subsist in man without there being physical evil as well, as Lactantius claims, that it is necessary to maintain, on the contrary, that man has only been subject to this evil because he gave up virtue and wisdom. If the doctrine of Lactantius were sound, we would necessarily have to suppose that the good angels are subject to thousands of discomforts, and that the souls of the blessed change alternately from joy to sorrow... Nothing is more contrary to the unanimous opinion both of theologians and of right reason than this. One can experience one of two contraries without having ever experienced the other. It is even the case that according to sound philosophy it is in no way necessary that our soul should have to experience evil in order that it might enjoy good.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note E. (p170).
Mr Bayle objects that the author of things, being infinitely beneficent, had to produce evil; (but I say that if with the pure good, that is, without pain and without sin, the perfection of things would only be 6 degrees as it were, and if with sin and pain this perfection is 8 degrees as it were, God cannot avoid permitting sin. Perfection consists in harmony, and often one has to step back for a better leap; it should also be considered that evil is not evil absolutely, that is, it is not evil to God and to the universe, but to the one who does it.)

Mr Bayle on p2325 calls Mr Pfanner a German theologian; he is a jurisconsult, councillor of Weimar, author of the Latin history of the peace of Munster and of other works.

Evil is attributed to the freedom of creatures (but it is an infinitely good and wise author who makes them [FC p181] in a way that he knows that they would sin. Or God found it good to make man sensible, that is, to permit evil for a greater good. But in what this good consists, I have neither the power nor the obligation to explain to you, it consists in the universal harmony, for little details are not sufficient and it is useless to enter into them.)

Happy fault, that merited such a Redeemer! When it is said that God’s ways are not our ways (ch. 55, v. 8), it should not be understood to mean that he has ideas of goodness and justice different from ours; he has the same ideas of those as we do, and we know them from him as we do the ideas of size and numbers, but we do not understand how he applies them, because we are not informed of that fact, the extent of which is too broad and surpasses our comprehension.

Mr Bayle says on p2326 that one should not dispute with a Manichean without first establishing the elevation of faith and the debasement of reason. (But I would be afraid of passing for a corrupter and [FC p182] betrayer of faith by tacitly making it pass for something absurd). A benefactor ought not to bestow gifts he knows will be abused. See Seneca On benefits. God ought not have given us freedom.

Mr Bayle also says that, according to Cotta, from [a book by] Cicero, as reason is the cause of all evils, it therefore ought not to have been given. (But to speak the truth, reason is a such a great and beautiful thing that it seems that the world would not have been worth creating without it, and if it could not be granted to creatures without sin thereby occurring, it was better, in my opinion, that sin occur.)

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4 Bayle does not say this; rather he says ‘The author of our being, if he is infinitely beneficent, ought to take continual pleasure in making us happy and in preventing everything that might trouble or diminish our pleasure. That is an essential characteristic contained in the idea of supreme goodness.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note E (p172). In summarizing Bayle’s position, Leibniz appears to have left out a ‘ne...pas’.

5 Leibniz does not indicate that this is a passage from Isaiah (55.8).

6 ‘we should not dispute with the Manicheans until we have established the doctrine of the elevation of faith and the abasement of reason.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note E (pp176-77). Bayle notes that The elevation of faith and the abasement of reason is the title of a book by Amyraut.

7 ‘Without having read Seneca’s fine treatise On Benefits, everyone knows by the natural light that it is essential to a benefactor not to bestow gifts that he knows will be abused in such a manner that they will only serve to bring about the ruin of the person to whom they are given.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note E (p177).

8 ‘Cotta, in a book of Cicero’s, offers so many arguments against those who say that the faculty of reason is a gift the gods bestowed upon man, that Cicero did not find himself capable of resolving these difficulties.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note E (p178).
Mr Bayle says on p2326 that it is inconceivable that the first man could have received, from the good principle, the faculty for doing wrong.\footnote{9} (Why? Creatures are essentially imperfect.)

Mr Bayle adds that, according to the ideas we have of a created being, we cannot comprehend at all that it can be a principle of action, and that receiving its existence and that of its faculties at all moments of its life, it created in itself any modalities by a power which is proper to it.\footnote{10} (But if God gives it faculties, they are therefore its own, and these faculties are nothing other than the power to produce [FC p183] modalities.) These modalities must be either indistinct from the substance of the soul, as the new philosophers claim, or distinct, as the Peripatetics assert (distinct, otherwise the soul would not be the same, which Mr Bayle nevertheless asserts); if they are distinct, they are entities drawn from nothing.\footnote{11} (Namely, it is the essence of the substance to do it continually.) They can therefore only be produced by a cause which can create. (To create is not to draw an entity from nothing, but to draw a substance from nothing, that is, a being capable of producing the source of a series of modifications.) All sects acknowledge that man is not such a cause\footnote{12} (I do not believe that at all); Father Malebranche (Treatise on nature and grace) claims that motion comes from elsewhere and that it can be stopped; this is contradictory, since there must be the force to stop it (it is true that the creature could not stop the impression, but it modifies it): a creature could not be moved by a simple permission to act (I concede this, if it didn’t have the faculty or force to act), a simple permission will not draw purely possible things nor put the [FC p184] divinity in a position to see what the creature will do (I agree). Most theologians found the preference on the decree, others claim that the decree leads to the creature finding itself in circumstances in which God foresaw that it would sin: so some claim that God foresaw the sin because of his decree, while others claim that he made the decree because he foresaw the sin. However it is explained, it follows that God willed man to sin (we should say that he willed to permit it) and that he preferred it to the perpetual duration of innocence (I accept this) which was easy for him to bring about and ordain (I deny this, excepting the greater perfection of things).\footnote{13}

\footnote{9} ‘it is inconceivable...doing wrong’ - this is a direct quote from note F (pp179-80).
\footnote{10} ‘according to the ideas that we have of a created being, we cannot comprehend at all that it can be a principle of action; that it can move itself; and that, while receiving its existence and that of its faculties at all moments of its life, while receiving it, I say, entirely from another cause, it created in itself any modalities by a power which is proper to it.’ Bayle, \emph{Historical and Critical Dictionary}, art. ‘Paulicians’ note F (p180).
\footnote{11} ‘These modalities must be either indistinct from the substance of the soul, as the new philosophers claim, or distinct from the soul’s substance, as the Peripatetics assert.’ Bayle, \emph{Historical and Critical Dictionary}, art. ‘Paulicians’ note F (p180).
\footnote{12} ‘They can...only be produced by a cause that can create. Now all the sects of philosophy agree that man is not such a cause.’ Bayle, \emph{Historical and Critical Dictionary}, art. ‘Paulicians’ note F (p180).
\footnote{13} ‘Some contend that the motion which pushes him comes from causes other than himself, but that, nonetheless, he can stop it and fix it upon a particular object. This is contradictory, since it does not require any less force to stop something moving than to move something at rest. Seeing therefore that a creature cannot be moved by a simple permission to act, and that it does not have the principle of motion in itself, it must necessarily be the case that God moves it. Therefore, he does something more than just permitting it to sin. This may be shown by a new reason, namely, that one cannot comprehend that a simple permission would bring contingent events out of a class of things that are just possible, or that this would put the divinity in a position of being completely sure that the creature will sin. A simple permission cannot be the basis for divine foreknowledge. It is this fact that has led most theologians to suppose that God has made a decree that declares that the creature will sin. This, according to them, is the foundation of foreknowledge. Others claim that the decree declares that the creature will be placed in the circumstances in which God has foreseen that it would sin. Thus some...'}
p2328, the invention of middle knowledge is chimerical, for it does not stop all the sins and all the misfortunes of man proceeding from the free choice of God. Mr Jurieu confesses that there is no one who is more uncomfortable than him with the difficulties of these decrees. He explained himself even more forcefully on all that, and you cannot deny that he invincibly refuted all these methods; and consequently no resource remains to you unless you adopt my system of two principles.14 (The principle of evil is not a substance, it is the possibility of things, it is this possibility which entails that among all these possible systems [FC p185] the one which contains evil is the best.) Mr Bayle says that he intends these remarks to humble reason15 (but that is suspect and appears to tend towards showing that faith is absurd).

Plutarch objects that Jupiter often makes men unhappy.16 (We are perhaps not unhappy, but even if we are, we are a very inconsiderable portion of infinity).

The Stoics have been pushed to the limit to such an extent that they are compelled to maintain that vice was useful, for otherwise, they would say, there would not have been any virtue.17 (They were right, this is the truth.) Chrysippus: nothing more silly than to want to think than there could have been good without there being evil.18 (They fail by wanting to explain exactly how it is useful.) Let us see the force with which Plutarch refuted them. ‘Therefore if we must infer that there is no good among the gods, then there cannot be any evil among them either. And there will be agreement and measure in a dance without anyone being in discord! (There will be circumstances where the appearance of the corrected discord will make the movement more beautiful, this is a nobler feature) and health to the human body without disease! (perhaps there would not be any health in us, if there were not in us some small sick animals) And there will be no virtue without vice! (it should be believed that virtue would not be [FC p186] as great without vice) Gout – is it for the good disposition of the feet? (Gout can be good for something else even though it is not good for dancing.) Achilles – would he have been hairy if Thersite had not been bald? Jupiter did not compose this world as a great farce, which is varied and of great knowledge (indeed, remove only the shocking word ‘farce’), but as a communal city for men and the gods, (but that is consistent, although besides men there is an infinity of creatures) to live there with justice and virtue (it should be believed that there would not have

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14 ‘[A Manichean would say] “You have invented something called middle knowledge as a deus ex machina to get you out of your chaos. This invention is chimerical...for it does not prevent all the sins and miseries of man from proceeding from the choice of God... There is a theologian as resolute as Bartolus, who admits, almost with tears in his eyes, “that there is no one more perplexed than he by the difficulties of these decrees... He explained himself even more forcefully elsewhere on this, and you cannot deny that he has completely and thoroughly refuted all these methods. And consequently you have no other recourse unless you adopt my system of the two principles.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note F (pp180-81).

15 ‘It is more useful than one would think to humble man’s reason by showing him with what force the most foolish heresies, like those of the Manicheans, may play games with it in order to confuse the most fundamental truths.’ Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art. ‘Paulicians’ note F (p186).

16 In note F Bayle quotes a passage from Plutarch’s Against the Stoics in which it is claimed that Jupiter’s government of the world, altogether excellent, nevertheless causes unhappiness in men.

17 This is a direct quote from note F.

18 This is a summary of a passage from Aulus Gellius Attic Nights VI.I, which is quoted by Bayle, though in his notes Leibniz does not indicate that he is quoting Gellius rather than Bayle.
been as much virtue if there were no vice). The life of man, from the beginning to the end, is disordered, depraved and perturbed (I am not of this sentiment at all). There is nothing pure in it (I grant this, it is something else).19 Yet it must be acknowledged, says Mr Bayle, that the Stoics were right in some respect, for example the luxury of the great and the good enables families to live.20

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19 This passage is a very loose paraphrasing from Plutarch’s Against the Stoics on Common Conceptions, 1065C: ‘Here it is time for them to assert that mankind has been given consumption with a view to his vigour and gout with a view to his fleetness of foot and that Achilles would not have had long hair if Thersites had not been bald.’ Leibniz simply quotes Bayle’s loose paraphrasing rather than Plutarch himself.

20 Bayle, Historical and Critical Dictionary, art ‘Paulicians’ note G.