

MALEBRANCHE

Nicolas Malebranche *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, IX, ed. Nicholas Jolley, trans. David Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 160-4.

IX. THEODORE. Let us attempt to understand properly the most general principles, Aristes. For afterwards all the rest follows of itself, everything is unfolded to the mind with order and a wonderful clarity. Thus, let us again consider, in the notion of the infinitely perfect Being, what the plans of God can be. I am not claiming that we shall be able to discover their details, but perhaps we shall recognize what is most general in them, and in what follows you will see that the little we have discovered about them will be of great use to us. Thus, do you think that God wills to create the most beautiful and the most perfect work He can?

ARISTES. Yes, undoubtedly, for the more perfect His work, the more it will express the qualities and perfections in which God glories That is evident by everything you have just told us.

THEODORE. Therefore, the universe is the most perfect God can create? What! So many monsters, so many disorders, the great number of impious people; does all this contribute to the perfection of the universe!

ARISTES. You confuse me, Theodore, God wills to make the most perfect possible work. For the more perfect it is, the more it will honor Him. That appears evident to me. But I clearly conceive that it would be more accomplished if it were free of the thousands and thousands of defects which disfigure it. That is a contradiction which stops me short. It seems that God has not executed His plan or has not adopted the plan most worthy of his attributes.

THEODORE. That is because you have still not properly understood the principals. You have not sufficiently meditated on the notion of the infinitely perfect Being which contains them. You still do not know how to make God act according to what He is.

THEOTIMUS. But, Aristes, might it not be that the irregularities of nature, monsters, and even the impious are like the shadows of a painting, which lend force to the work and relief to the figures?

ARISTES. That thought has an "I know not what" which pleases the imagination, but the mind is not satisfied by it. For I understand quite well that the universe would be more perfect if there were nothing irregular in any of the parts comprising it, and on the contrary there is almost no place where there is not some defect.

THEOTIMUS. Thus, it is because God did not will His work to be perfect.

ARISTES. That is not the reason either. For God cannot positively and directly will the irregularities which disfigure His work and which express none of the perfections He possesses and in which he is Glorified. That appears evident to me. God permits disorder, but He does not create it. He does not will it.

THEOTIMUS. "God permits": I do not really understand this expression. Whom does God permit to freeze the vines and ruin the harvest He made grow? Why does He permit monsters in His work which He does not make and does not will? What then! Is the universe not such as God willed it?

ARISTES. No, for the universe is not such as God made it.

THEOTIMUS. That may be true in respect of the disorders which have crept into it through the poor use of freedom. For God did not make the impious. He permitted people to become that way. I do indeed understand that, although I do not know the reasons for it. But certainly it is only God who makes monsters.

ARISTES. What stranger creatures these monsters are, if they do not do honor to Him who gives them being. Do you know, THEOTIMUS, why God, who today covers the entire countryside with flowers and fruit, will tomorrow ravage it with frost or hail?

THEOTIMUS. That is because the countryside will be more beautiful in its sterility than in its fecundity, although that doesn't suit us. Often we judge the beauty of God's works by the utility we derive from them, and we deceive ourselves.

ARISTES. Still, it is better to judge them by their utility than by their inutility. What a beautiful thing, a country desolated by a tempest!

THEOTIMUS. Quite beautiful. A country inhabited by sinners should be in desolation.

ARISTES. If the tempest spared the lands of good people, perhaps you would be right. It would be even more appropriate to refuse rain to the field of a brute, than to make this wheat germinate and grow in order to cut it down by hail that would surely be the shortest route. But it is often, however, the less culpable who are the more ill-treated. What seeming contradictions in the actions of God! Theodore has already given me the principles which dispel these contradictions. but I understood them so poorly that I no longer remember them. If you do not wish, Theotimus, to set me on the correct path, let Theodore speak, for I see that you are entertained by the difficulty in which I find myself.

THEOTIMUS. What is fair.

X. THEODORE. You see, Aristes, that it is not enough to have glimpsed the principles; it is necessary to have understood them properly, in order that they be present to the mind when necessary. Listen, therefore, since Theotimus does not wish to tell you what he knows perfectly well.

You are not deceived in believing that the more perfect a work is, the more it expresses the perfections of the workman, and that it does him greater honor the more the perfections it expresses please him who possesses them and that thus God wills to make His work the most perfect possible. But you can grasp only half of the principle, and that is what leaves you perplexed. God wills that His work honors Him; you understand that well. Note, however, that God does not will that His ways dishonor Him. That is the other half of the principle. God wills that His action as well as His work bear the character of His attributes. Not content that the universe honors Him through its excellence and beauty. He wills that

His ways glorify Him through their simplicity, their fecundity, their universality, through the characteristics which express the qualities He is glorified in possessing.

Thus, do not imagine that God willed absolutely to make the most perfect work possible, but only the most perfect in relation to the ways most worthy of Him. for what God wills uniquely, directly, absolutely in His plans is always to act as divinely as possible. It is to make His action as well as His work bear the character of his attributes; it is to act exactly according to what He is and according to all that He is. From all eternity God saw all possible works and all the possible ways of producing each of them, and as He acts only for His glory, only according to what He is. he determined to will that work which could be produced and conserved in those ways which, combined with that work, would honor Him more than any other work produced in any other way. He formed the plan which would better convey the character of His attributes, which would express more exactly the qualities He possesses and glories in possessing. Fully embrace this principle, Aristes, lest it escape you for of all principles it is perhaps the most fertile.

Once again, do not imagine that God ever forms His plan blindly, I mean, without having compared it with the ways necessary for its implementation. that is how people act who often regret their decisions because of the difficulties in which they find themselves. Nothing is difficult to God. Note, however, that not everything is equally worthy of Him. **His ways as well as his work must bear the character of His attributes. Thus, God must have regard for the ways as well as the work. It is not enough that His work honors Him through its excellence; His ways must further glorify Him through their divinity. And if a world more perfect than ours could be created and conserved only in ways which are correspondingly less perfect, in such a manner that the expression, as it were, which this new world and its new ways gave the divine qualities was less than their expression in our world, I am not afraid to say this to you: God is too wise. He loves His glory too much, He acts too exactly according to what He is, to prefer this new world to the universe He has created.** For in his plans God is indifferent only when they are equally wise, equally divine, equally glorious for Him, equally worthy of His attributes, and only when the relation, composed of the beauty of the work and the simplicity of His ways, is exactly equal. When this relation is unequal, although God is able to do nothing since He is self-sufficient. He cannot choose and adopt the worse once. He is able not to act, but He cannot act in vain, nor can He multiply His ways without proportionally augmenting the beauty of His work. His wisdom protects Him against adopting, from all possible plans, that which is not the wisest. the love He bears Himself does not allow Him to choose the plan which does not honor Him the most.