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LEIBNIZ

discourse on metaphysics

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY BY

Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra

Leibniz: Discourse on Metaphysics

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

First Edition published in 2020

Impression: 1

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019957110

ISBN 978–0–19–882904–1

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198829041.001.0001

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Contents

Acknowledgements

The idea for this book originated in two undergraduate seminars on the *Discourse on Metaphysics* I gave in Oriel College in Michaelmas Term 2012 and Trinity Term 2013. I had a group of spectacularly good students: Hugh Acland, Ksenia Harwood, Patrick Penzo, Philip Saville, Alec Siantonas, Anatole Sloan, Emily Smith, Amit Visana, and Alexandra Wilson. I enjoyed the seminars enormously, I learnt from these students, and they inspired me to write a book on the *Discourse*: my thanks to them. My original idea for the book was a different one. In any case, another set of students were the last people to comment on a version of the manuscript. These were the members of a graduate seminar I gave in Trinity Term 2018: Michael Bevan, Thomas Carswell, Lydia Drabkin-Reiter, Caspar Jacobs, Tien-Chun Lo, Tobias Newberry, Joshua Pearson, Wesley Roberts, Andrea Vitangeli, and George Webster. I am very grateful to them for their comments on my book. I would also like to thank the following colleagues, from whom I benefitted from conversations, written comments, and answers to e-mail questions: María Rosa Antognazza, Martha Bolton, Bruno Borge, Sebastián Briceño, Greg Brown, Tomás Castagnino, Agustín Echavarría, Dan Garber, Brian Leftow, Sam Levey, Brandon Look, Enrique Moros Claramunt, Michael Peramatzis, Pauline Phemister, Giorgio Pini, Stephen Puryear, Enrique Romerales Espinosa, and Bill Wood. Thanks also to two anonymous referees for very useful comments, to Juliane Kerkhecker and David Maskell for help with linguistic issues, and to Peter Momtchiloff for his patience and understanding. Six people deserve special thanks: Ghislain Guigon discussed several parts of the manuscript with me and he also went through the whole translation commenting on it, and I discussed a version of the manuscript with Paula Castelli, Rodolfo Fazio, and Ezequiel Zerbudis, and a later version with Thomas Møller-Nielsen and Martin Pickup—all these discussions were extremely helpful and enjoyable.

Part of my comments on Section 8 reproduce parts of my chapter 'Leibniz on Substance in the Discourse on Metaphysics' (in T. Stoneham and P. Lodge (eds.), *Locke and Leibniz on substance*, London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 146–62). Thanks to Routledge and Tony Bruce for allowing me to reproduce such material. The text of the *Discourse* I have translated is the one published by the Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften. Thanks to Stephan Meier-Oeser for granting me permission to publish a translation of the Akademie edition of the *Discourse*.

G R-P

January 2019

PART 1
INTRODUCTION

Leibniz is one of the most important metaphysicians of all time. And the *Discourse on Metaphysics* is one of his fundamental works. Why is it so important? Because it is the most accomplished systematic expression of Leibniz's philosophy in the 1680s. Leibniz wrote the *Discourse*, in French, at some point during the winter of 1685–86, most likely in January 1686. Leibniz was then 39 years old. Although he had published only a few philosophy papers, he had been writing philosophy continuously at least since 1663, the year he submitted his bachelor's degree dissertation on the principle of individuation. But the mid 1680s represent an important point in his philosophical development, since it is at that time when Leibniz's philosophy reaches maturity—Leibniz himself was aware of this since he suggested so in a letter to Burnett of 1697 (G III 205). In the case of Leibniz, that he reached philosophical maturity in the mid 1680s means that he then came to hold certain theses that are distinctively Leibnizian, many of which he would continue to hold for the rest of his career (although not necessarily in exactly the same form), he had interesting reasons to hold them, and he organised them into a philosophical system. That system is best represented in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*.

The *Discourse* is divided into thirty-seven sections. Each section is preceded by a short, sometimes very short, heading. Leibniz wanted Arnauld to give him his opinion about the ideas in the *Discourse*. But instead of sending him the whole work, he sent him these headings of each section. This is how the so-called correspondence between Leibniz and Arnauld got started; but Arnauld never saw the whole manuscript and the whole correspondence is based on the headings sent by Leibniz. Leibniz never published the *Discourse*, which was published posthumously in Hanover in 1846 by C. L. Grotefend. Its current title was given by Grotefend, but it is taken from a reference to it by Leibniz. Indeed, in the letter to Hessen-Rheinfels in which Leibniz asks him to send the headings of the sections to Arnauld, Leibniz refers to it as 'a small discourse on metaphysics' (A 2 2 3/LA 3).

Leibniz: Discourse on Metaphysics: Translated with introduction and commentary by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, Oxford University Press (2020). © Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198829041.001.0001

Here is a brief description of the *Discourse*'s structure and content. The sections are not grouped into larger chapters. But the following rough thematic divisions can be made:

Sections 1–7: divine creative activity and its consequences for human beings.
Sections 8–16: the nature of created substance in general.
Sections 17–22: natural laws and explanation in natural science.
Sections 23–29: ideas.
Sections 30–37: God's relation to minds.

These divisions are rough: there are lots of things in the sections in one group that relate to the themes of another group. For instance, Section 33 is about the union of mind and body, and thus it is connected to what Leibniz says in Sections 14–15. Similarly, Section 12 is about the substance of body and is thus related to much of what Leibniz says in Sections 17–18 and Section 21. And Section 30, which is about the action of God on the human will, and therefore on freedom, is very much connected with Section 13. But these divisions indicate that the *Discourse* is not a work of metaphysics exclusively. For it includes discussions that belong to epistemology, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, and philosophical theology.

Leibniz's philosophy is an intellectual hymn to God, and the *Discourse* is a beautiful and impressive interpretation of that hymn. The overarching aim of the work is, in my view, to provide a metaphysics for Christianity. That is, Leibniz's goal is to give the answers that he believes Christians should give to the basic metaphysical questions, questions about why the world exists, what is the world like, what kinds of things exist, and what is the place of human beings in the world. There are reasons to think that Leibniz does not provide an adequate metaphysics for Christianity, since, for instance, as we shall see in the commentary on Section 16, he does not satisfactorily account for the possibility of miracles, an essential element in the Christian view of the world.

The following is a concise description of the main propositions of the system of the *Discourse*. There is a God and there is a multiplicity of created individual substances. God is a perfect being and he acts in the most perfect way, and the world God has created is the best possible world. God is free and does not act by necessity. God's work is perfectly rational and orderly. When he acts, he uses the simplest means to obtain the greatest effect. Each substance has a complete concept that includes everything that is true of it. Since the individual notion of a substance contains in it everything that happens to it, all the events that happen to a substance can, in principle, be predicted *a priori*. Nevertheless most of what happens to a substance is contingent. No two of these substances are perfectly similar, though they mirror and express each other so perfectly that perfect knowledge of one substance would mean perfect knowledge of every other substance. Thus

what happens to a substance corresponds to what happens to all the others, but there is no causal action between any two substances. All our ideas are innate. The nature of body is not extension, substantial forms must be acknowledged if bodies are substances, and final causes are useful in physics. Some substances are more perfect than others, and the most perfect of all are the intelligent minds. Minds have the capacity to reflect on themselves, which renders them capable of moral qualities. God is the monarch of a perfect republic composed of all minds, and the happiness of minds is God's principal purpose.

Thus very many of the characteristic theses of Leibniz's philosophy of the 1680s are present in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*. There are a few notable absences. One is the lack of visibility of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Leibniz does formulate it in the *Discourse*, in Section 13, but he does so in passing, does not flag its importance, and does not give it its name. I shall discuss the Principle of Sufficient Reason in my discussion of Sections 13 and 16. Another notable absence in the *Discourse* is that of an argument for the existence of God. Leibniz had an opportunity to give or sketch an argument for God's existence in Section 23, but he did not do so. I shall say more about this in my commentary on Section 23 (and I will conclude, among other things, that what he says in Sections 23 and 24 seems to invalidate much of the *Discourse*). A third notable absence is that of the thesis that there are no purely extrinsic denominations. It never appears explicitly formulated, although Leibniz says things that entail it. A fourth notable absence is the idea that the soul or the mind contains not only perceptions but also appetitions, which is an idea present in other texts of the same period, for instance in *De mundo praesenti* (A 6 4 1508/AR 287). Yet another notable absence is that of the theory of corporeal substance, present in the correspondence with Arnauld, according to which every corporeal substance is constituted by other corporeal substances, which are in turn constituted by other corporeal substances, and so on *ad infinitum* (A 2 2 249/LA 152). In my view, Leibniz was uncertain in the *Discourse* about the existence of corporeal substances, and he tried to be neutral with respect to them, although occasionally he says things that commit him to them. His views on corporeal substances are in flux at the time of writing the *Discourse*, and in a later copy of it he shows a firmer commitment to the substantiality of bodies than in the more neutral autograph version. Leibniz never fully thematises the topic of corporeal substance in any section and I base my interpretation on what Leibniz says, often in passing, in several sections—thus I shall present my thoughts on this in my discussion of Sections 8–14, 18, and 33–35.

I have said several times that the *Discourse* is a philosophical system, but some interpreters think that describing the *Discourse* as a system is somewhat exaggerated and that, in fact, the *Discourse* contains three separate semi-systems: the theory of individual substance, the theory of bodies, and the theory of harmony of perceptions and actions, and the reason for taking them as three separate semi-systems is, presumably, that they are jointly inconsistent (Wilson 1989: 80–81). By a

philosophical system I understand a set of interrelated philosophical propositions which provide answers to several basic philosophical questions, and which are meant to derive from a few basic principles or theses (cf. Rescher 1981b: 118). There is no requirement here for a system to be consistent, or for it to be complete in the sense of answering all the relevant questions, or for the propositions that are meant to derive from other ones to really derive from them. In my view it is clear that Leibniz intended the *Discourse* to be a set of interrelated philosophical propositions providing answers to several basic philosophical questions, and that he meant these propositions to derive from a few basic principles or theses. In particular, he saw the theory of bodies and the theory of the harmony of perceptions and actions as deriving, in complex ways, from his theory of individual substance, which in turn derives from his thesis about true predication.

The central basic principles or theses of the *Discourse* from which the others are meant to follow are two: the thesis that God is perfect, which Leibniz introduces in Section 1, and the thesis that truth is grounded in the nature of things, which Leibniz introduces in Section 8 and from which he derives his famous principle that in every true predication the predicate is included in the subject. No doubt he also appeals to other theses in some of his derivations, for instance that a perfection is a form that admits of a maximum degree (Section 1) and Galileo's law of free falling bodies (Section 17). (Note that, although Leibniz does not argue that Galileo's law derives from any more basic principles, it must have its ultimate justification in the fact that it forms part of the best possible world, which itself derives from the principle that God is perfect.) But my claim is not that those two are the only basic, underived principles or theses but that they are the *central*, basic, underived principles of Leibniz's in the *Discourse*. Any other basic principles or theses he uses in deriving the rest of his system are auxiliary to either or both of those two principles, namely that God is perfect and that truth is grounded in the nature of things.

Now, although these two are the central, basic, underived principles in the *Discourse*, it is two other derived principles that are the two central operative principles, that is, the principles that do most of the work. These are the principles that God has created the best possible world or the best series of things (which derives from the basic principle that God is perfect) and that a substance has an individual concept so complete that it includes everything that is true of it, past, present and future (which derives from the principle that in every true predication the predicate is included in the subject and, ultimately, from the principle that truth is grounded in the nature of things). It is these two principles that Leibniz uses the most to derive the most diverse theses, theses about the origin of our ideas, the nature of matter, and the fairness of God in the distribution of grace, to name a few.

Let me briefly say something about the commentary and the translation. The commentary is not a summary or even an introduction to its text, and so this

commentary should not be read before reading the *Discourse*. The purpose of the commentary is to elucidate and explain how Leibniz is arguing in the *Discourse*, and therefore the commentary should ideally be read in conjunction with the *Discourse*. In my view the best explanation of a philosophical text is critical explanation, that is, an explanation that highlights the virtues and problems of the text in question. Thus my commentary will be a critical commentary. But my purpose is not to explain Leibniz's philosophy in general, nor is it to relate the *Discourse* to the rest of his philosophy. Thus I shall connect what Leibniz says in the *Discourse* with what he says in other places only when I think that helps to illuminate and elucidate the *Discourse*. In this respect I must say that I do not hold the correspondence with Arnauld to be the key to understanding what Leibniz is doing in the *Discourse*, which does not mean that what Leibniz says to Arnauld is irrelevant to understanding the *Discourse*. But the correspondence with Arnauld lasted for a few years, a period of time in which anyone's views are likely to evolve, even more so if one is regularly discussing one's views with someone of Arnauld's intellectual stature, and so there is no reason to think that what is unclear or unsaid in the *Discourse* must be what Leibniz says clearly to Arnauld.[1] No text, except the *Discourse*, is the key to the *Discourse*.

I have not organised my commentary thematically; instead, I have decided to comment on each section separately. This means that there is a lot of cross-referencing since, due to the systematic nature of the *Discourse*, each section bears on many others. I think this organisation makes intelligible how Leibniz was arguing in the *Discourse* and the different positions he adopted therein. But because each section of the *Discourse* bears on many others, many topics are discussed in several sections of the commentary.

There are other translations of the whole or part of the *Discourse* into English and, when working on my translation, I have consulted the best known of them: Ariew and Garber's (AG), Loemker's (L), Lucas and Grint's (LG), Montgomery's (M), Morris and Parkinson's (MP), and Woolhouse and Francks' (WF). But although the best of these ones are acceptable in general lines, there are words, phrases, and sentences that I would translate otherwise, and that is why I have decided to do a new translation. One virtue of my translation is that my terminology is more unified and coherent than those of other translations. I have tried to be as close as possible to the French while preserving sense. When necessary, I have let my translation be dictated by what makes philosophical sense, provided it is linguistically acceptable (an example of this is my translation of the word 'luy' as 'it' at the end of Section 8, for which see both the footnote on the translation and my commentary on Section 8). My translation follows the text printed in the Akademie edition of Leibniz's works (A 6 4 1531–1588), referred to in that edition

[1] Indeed, as Robert Sleigh has pointed out, there is less connection between the *Discourse* and the correspondence with Arnauld than one might expect (Sleigh 1990: 2).

as copy L^1. This text is a draft written by Leibniz himself. This text contains the headings of the sections, but some of these headings are slightly different from the ones he sent to Arnauld; when I judged the difference between the headings to be significant, I have explained such a difference in footnotes. Occasionally I have followed the text from a copy made by one of Leibniz's secretaries (l^2), and when I do so I have signalled this in the footnotes. One way in which I have not followed the text published by the Akademie is that I have divided the sections into paragraphs to facilitate the reading; in dividing the sections into paragraphs I have followed Henri Lestienne's edition of the *Discourse* (LES). Another way in which I have not followed the text published by the Akademie is in the punctuation. Here I have allowed myself to innovate in order to facilitate understanding, but I have often followed Lestienne in terms of punctuation. All footnotes to the translation are mine, none are Leibniz's.

PART 2

DISCOURSE ON METAPHYSICS

Translation

1. Of divine perfection, and that God does everything in the most desirable manner

The most significant notion of God that we have is well enough stated in these terms, that God is an absolutely perfect being, but its consequences are not sufficiently considered; and to penetrate into this further, it is appropriate to remark that there are in nature several wholly different perfections, that God has them all together, and that each one belongs to him in the highest degree.

It is also necessary to know what a perfection is, of which this is a sure enough mark, namely that the forms or natures that are not susceptible of a highest degree are not perfections, as for example, the nature of number or of figure. For the greatest number of all (or, indeed, the number of all numbers), as well as the greatest of all figures, imply a contradiction, but the greatest knowledge and omnipotence do not include any impossibility. Consequently, power and knowledge are perfections and, in so far as they belong to God, they have no boundaries.

Whence it follows that God, possessing supreme and infinite wisdom, acts in the most perfect manner, not only in the metaphysical sense, but morally speaking as well, which can in relation to ourselves be expressed in this way, that the more enlightened and informed one becomes about the works of God, the more disposed one will be to find them excellent, and entirely satisfying in relation to everything that one could even have desired.

2. Against those who maintain that there is no goodness in the works of God, or that the rules of goodness and beauty are arbitrary

Thus I am very far from the opinion of those who maintain that there are no rules of goodness and perfection in the nature of things or in the ideas that God has of

Leibniz: Discourse on Metaphysics: Translated with introduction and commentary by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra, Oxford University Press (2020). © Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198829041.001.0001

them, and that the works of God are good only for the formal reason that God has made them. For if that were so, God, knowing that he is their author, would not have had to contemplate them afterwards and find them good, as is testified by the Holy Scripture,[1] which seems to use this anthropomorphism only to make clear to us that their excellence is recognised when they are contemplated in themselves, even when we do not reflect on this completely bare external denomination that relates them to their cause. This is all the more true, since it is by considering the works that one can discover the workman. Hence these works must bear his character in them. I confess that the opposite opinion seems to me extremely dangerous and very close to that of the latest innovators, whose opinion is that the beauty of the universe, and the goodness we attribute to the works of God, are nothing but chimeras of men, who conceive of God in their own manner. Also, in saying that things are not good because of any rule of goodness, but because of the sole will of God, one inadvertently destroys, it seems to me, all the love of God and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done, if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the opposite? Where then will his justice and his wisdom be, if all that remains is a certain despotic power, if the will takes the place of reason, and if, according to the definition of tyrants, what pleases the most powerful is just by that very fact? Besides, it seems that every will presupposes *aliquam rationem volendi*[2] or that reason is naturally prior to the will. This is why I still find completely strange this expression of some philosophers, that the eternal truths of metaphysics or geometry (and consequently also the rules of goodness, justice, and perfection) are nothing but effects of the will of God, instead it seems to me, that they are consequences of his understanding, which certainly does not depend on his will any more than his essence does.

3. Against those who believe that God could have done better

Neither could I approve the opinion of some moderns who boldly maintain that what God does is not of the highest perfection, and that he could have acted much better. Because it seems to me that the consequences of this opinion are completely contrary to the glory of God. *Uti minus malum habet rationem boni, ita minus bonum habet rationem mali*.[3] And it is to act imperfectly to act with less perfection than one could have acted. To show that an architect could have done better is to find fault with his work. Again, this goes against the Holy Scripture, when it assures us of the goodness of the works of God. For, since imperfections descend to infinity, in whatever way God had made his work, it would always

[1] Genesis, I, 31. [2] This Latin phrase means 'some reason for willing'.
[3] This Latin phrase means 'Just as a lesser evil contains an element of good, so the lesser good contains an element of evil'.

have been good in comparison with the less perfect ones, if that were enough; but a thing is hardly praiseworthy when it is only so in this manner. I also believe that an infinity of passages will be found in the divine scripture and the Holy Fathers favouring my opinion, but hardly any will be found for that of these moderns, which in my judgement is unknown to the whole antiquity, and is grounded only in our having too little knowledge of the general harmony of the universe and of the hidden reasons for the conduct of God, which makes us judge rashly that many things could have been done better. Besides, these moderns insist on some subtleties that are not very solid, for they imagine that nothing is so perfect that there is not something more perfect, which is an error.

They also believe that in that way they provide for the freedom of God, as if the highest freedom were not to act perfectly, according to sovereign reason. For to believe that God does something without having any reason for his will, apart from the fact that it seems that this cannot be, is an opinion which conforms little with his glory. For example, let us suppose that God chooses between A and B, and that he takes A without having any reason for preferring it to B, I say that this action of God would at least not be praiseworthy; for all praise must be grounded in some reason which, *ex hypothesi*,[4] is not found here. Instead I maintain that God does nothing for which he does not deserve to be glorified.

4. That the love of God requires a complete satisfaction and acquiescence regarding what he does without us having to be quietists because of that[5]

The general knowledge of this great truth, that God always acts in the most perfect and desirable manner that is possible, is in my judgement the ground of the love that we owe to God above all things, since he who loves seeks his satisfaction in the happiness or perfection of the loved object and of its actions. *Idem velle et idem nolle vera amicitia est*.[6] And I believe that it is difficult to love God well, when one is not disposed to will what he wills, even if one had the power to change it. Indeed, those who are not satisfied with what he does seem to me like discontented subjects whose intention is not very different from that of rebels.

I maintain then that, according to these principles, in order to act in conformity with the love of God, it is not enough to force ourselves to be patient, but we must be truly satisfied with all that has happened to us according to his will. I mean this acquiescence with respect to the past. For, with respect to the future, we must not

[4] This Latin phrase means 'by hypothesis'.

[5] In the version of the headings he sent to Arnauld, Leibniz omitted the phrase I have translated as 'without us having to be quietists because of that'.

[6] This Latin phrase means 'To will the same and to dislike the same is true friendship'. This quote is inspired in a very similar one from Sallust.

be quietists and wait ridiculously with arms folded for what God will do, according to the sophism that the ancients used to call *logon aergon*,[7] the lazy reason, but we must act according to what we presume to be the will of God, so far as we can judge of it, trying with all our power to contribute to the general good, and particularly to the adornment and perfection of what concerns us, or what is near us and, so to speak, within reach. For when the outcome may perhaps show that God did not on this occasion want that our good will had its effect, it does not follow from this that he did not want us to do what we did. On the contrary, since he is the best of all masters, he only ever requires the right intention, and it is for him to know the proper time and place for bringing the good designs to success.

5. In what the rules of perfection of divine conduct consist and that the simplicity of ways is in balance with the richness of effects

It is sufficient, then, to have this confidence in God, that he does everything for the best, and that nothing can harm those who love him; but to know in particular the reasons that could have moved him to choose this order of the universe, to allow sins, to dispense his saving graces in a certain manner, this goes beyond the forces of a finite mind, especially when it has not yet attained the enjoyment of the vision of God.

However some general remarks can be made concerning the conduct of providence in the government of things. It can then be said that he who acts perfectly is like an excellent geometer, who knows how to find the best constructions for a problem; like a good architect, who makes use of his location and the funds destined for the building in the most advantageous manner, not allowing anything disagreeable or that lacks the beauty of which it is capable; like a good head of family, who uses his property in such a way that nothing is left waste or sterile; like a skilled machinist, who produces his work in the least difficult way that could be chosen; and like a knowledgeable author, who includes the maximum number of realities in the smallest volume he can. Now, the most perfect of all beings, and which occupy the least volume, that is to say, those that interfere with each other the least, those are the minds, whose perfections are the virtues. That is why one must not doubt that the happiness of minds is the principal aim of God and that he achieves it as much as the general harmony allows it. I shall say more about this shortly.

Concerning the simplicity of the ways of God, it holds properly with regard to the means, while, on the contrary, their variety, richness, or abundance holds with regard to the ends or effects. And the one must be in balance with the other, as the

[7] In Greek in the original.

costs of a building with the size and beauty demanded of it. It is true that nothing costs God anything, much less than it costs a philosopher to make hypotheses for the construction of his imaginary world, for God has only to make decrees to make a real world be born; but, in matters of wisdom, the decrees or hypotheses play the role of expenditures to the extent that they are more independent of one another. For reason wishes to avoid the multiplicity of hypotheses or principles, as the simplest system is always preferred in astronomy.

6. God does nothing out of order and it is not even possible to feign events that are not regular[8]

The wills or actions of God are commonly divided into ordinary or extraordinary. But it is good to consider that God does nothing out of order. Thus, what passes for extraordinary, is so only with regard to some particular order established among creatures. For everything conforms to the universal order. This is so true that, not only does nothing absolutely irregular happen in the world, but one cannot even feign such a thing. For let us suppose, for example, that someone makes a number of points on paper quite at random, as do those who practice the ridiculous art of geomancy. I say that it is possible to find a geometric line whose notion is constant and uniform according to a certain rule, such that this line passes through all these points, and in the same order as the hand had made them.

And if someone drew in one stroke a line which was now straight, now circular, now of another nature, it is possible to find a notion or rule, or equation common to all the points of this line, in virtue of which these very changes must occur. And there is no face, for example, whose contour is not part of a geometric line and cannot be traced in one stroke by a certain movement according to a rule. But when a rule is very complex, what conforms to it passes for irregular.

Thus it can be said that, in whatever manner God had created the world, it would always have been regular and with a certain general order. But God has chosen that one which is the most perfect, that is to say, that one which is at the same time the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena, as might be a geometric line whose construction is easy and whose properties and effects are very admirable and of great extent. I use these comparisons to sketch an imperfect resemblance of the divine wisdom, and to say what may at least elevate our mind to conceive in some way what cannot be sufficiently expressed. But I do not intend to explain thereby this great mystery on which the whole universe depends.

[8] I have translated the two uses of 'feindre' in this section as 'feign'. Sometimes translators translate it as 'imagine' (AG 39, WF 58). But if Leibniz had meant 'imagine' he could have used 'imaginer', a word he uses elsewhere in the *Discourse*. For more reasons supporting my decision see my commentary on Section 6.

7. That miracles conform to the general order, although they are contrary to the subordinate maxims. Of what God wills or permits, and of general or particular will

Now, since nothing can be done which is not in the order, it can be said that miracles are as much in the order as the natural operations, which are so-called because they conform to certain subordinate maxims that we call the nature of things. For it can be said that this nature is only a habit of God, which he can break because of a reason stronger than that which moved him to use those maxims.

Concerning the general or particular wills, according to how one takes the matter, it can be said that God does everything according to his most general will, which conforms to the most perfect order that he has chosen; but it can also be said that he has particular wills that are exceptions to those subordinate maxims mentioned above, for the most general of God's laws, which rules the whole sequence of the universe, is without exception.

It can also be said that God wills everything that is an object of his particular will; but concerning the objects of his general will, such as the actions of other creatures,[9] in particular of those that are rational, with which God wants to concur, one must make a distinction: for if the action is good in itself, it can be said that God wills it and sometimes commands it, even when it does not happen; but if it is evil in itself, and it becomes good only by accident, because the sequence of things, and particularly punishment and reparation, corrects its evilness, and repays the evil of it with interest, so that in the end there is more perfection in the whole sequence than if all this evil had not happened, it must be said that God permits it, and not that he wills it, although he concurs with it because of the laws of nature that he has established, and because he knows to draw from it a greater good.

8. To distinguish the actions of God and the creatures it is explained what the notion of an individual substance consists in

It is quite difficult to distinguish the actions of God from those of creatures, as well as the actions and passions of these creatures themselves. For there are those who believe that God does everything, others imagine that he does no more than conserve the force that he has given to the creatures: what follows will show to what extent the one or the other can be said. Now, since actions and passions

[9] 'other creatures' is a mistake. Leibniz means 'such as the actions of creatures'.