

“Leibniz’s Philosophical Dream”¹

Translated by Donald Rutherford

I was satisfied with what I was among men, but I was not satisfied with human nature. I often considered with chagrin the hardships to which we are subjected, the shortness of our life, the vanity of glory, the improprieties that are born of sensual pleasure, the illnesses that overwhelm even our spirit; finally, the annihilation of all our greatness and all our perfections in the moment of death, which appears to reduce to nothing the fruits of our labors. These meditations left me full of melancholy. I naturally loved to act well and to know the truth. Yet it appeared that I punished myself unnecessarily, that a successful crime was worth more than an oppressed virtue, and that a madness that is content is preferable to an aggrieved reason. However, I resisted these objections and directed my mind on the right course by thinking about the divinity who must have given a good order to everything and who sustained my hopes with the expectation of a future capable of redressing everything. This conflict was renewed in me by the sight of some great disturbance, either among men, when I saw injustice triumph and innocence chastened, or in nature, when hurricanes or earthquakes destroyed cities and provinces and caused thousands to die without distinguishing the good from the wicked, as though nature cared no more for us than we trouble ourselves about ants or worms that we encounter in our path. I was greatly moved by these spectacles and could not stop myself pitying the condition of mortals.

One day, being fatigued from these thoughts, I fell asleep and found myself in a dark place which resembled an underground cavern. It was vast and very deep and everywhere there swarmed men who strangely rushed into the darkness in pursuit of luminous trifles they called “honors,” or glittering little flies they called “riches.” There were many who searched the ground for bright bits of rotten wood they called “sensual pleasures.” Each of these evil lights had its followers; there were some who had changed sides and others who had quit the chase altogether because of exhaustion or despair. Some of those who ran blindly and often believed they had reached their goal fell into crevasses, out of which only moans were heard. Some were bitten by scorpions and other venomous creatures that left them wretched and often mad. Yet neither these examples nor the arguments of persons better informed stopped others from chasing the same hazards and even entering into fights in order to forestall rivals or keep themselves from being forestalled.

In the vault of this huge cavern there were little holes and almost imperceptible cracks. Here a trace of daylight entered; yet it was so weak that it required careful attention to notice it. One frequently heard voices which said, “Stop you mortals, or run like the

¹ LH IV 8 Bl. 51-52. The French text of this undated essay is found in E. Bodemann, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften*, pp. 108-111. The title is the addition of an early keeper of Leibniz’s papers. Akademie editors have assigned a putative date of 1693 to the piece. It is slated to appear in volume 5 of series VI of the Akademie edition.

miserable beings you are.” Others said, “Raise your eyes to the sky.” But no one stopped and no one raised their eyes except in pursuit of these dangerous trinkets. I was one of those who was greatly struck by these voices. I began often to look above me and finally recognized the small light which demanded so much attention. It seemed to me to grow stronger the more I gazed steadily at it. My eyes were saturated with its rays, and when, immediately after, I relied on it to see where I was going, I could discern what was around me and what would suffice to secure me from dangers. A venerable old man who had wandered for a long time in the cave and who had had thoughts very similar to mine told me that this light was what is called “intelligence” or “reason” in us. I often changed position in order to test the different holes in the vault that furnished this small light, and when I was located in a spot where several beams could be seen at once from their true point of view, I found a collection of rays which greatly enlightened me. This technique was of great help to me and left me more capable of acting in the darkness. After testing many positions, I was at last led by my good fortune to a place that was unique and the most advantageous in the cave, a place reserved for those whom the divinity wished to remove completely from this darkness. Hardly had I begun to look upward than I was surrounded by a bright light shining from all sides: the whole cave and its miseries were fully disclosed to my eyes. But a moment later a dazzling clarity surprised me. It soon expanded and I saw before me the image of a young man whose beauty enchanted my senses. There seemed a majesty about him, which produced a veneration mixed with apprehension; yet the gentleness of his gaze reassured me. I began, however, to be aware of myself weakening and was about to faint, when I felt myself touched by a bough imbued with a marvelous liquor. I could compare it to nothing I had ever felt before and it gave me the strength to endure the presence of this celestial messenger. He called me by name and spoke to me in a charming voice: “Give thanks to the divine goodness which releases you from this madness.” At the same time he touched me again and at that instant I felt myself rise. I was no longer in the cavern; I no longer saw the vault above me. I found myself on a high mountain, which revealed to me the face of the earth. I saw at a distance what I only wanted to consider in general; yet when I studied some spot in a determined way, it at once grew and I needed no other telescopic vision than my own attention to see it as though it were next to me. This gave me a marvelous pleasure and emboldened me to say to my guide: “Mighty spirit—for I cannot doubt that you are of the number of those celestial figures who make up the court surrounding the sovereign of the universe—since you have wanted to clarify so my eyes, will you do as much for my mind?”

It seemed to me that he smiled at this speech and took pleasure in hearing of my desire. “Your wish is granted,” he said to me, “since you hold wisdom above the pleasure of those vain spectacles the world presents to your eyes. However, you will lose nothing that is substantial in those same spectacles. You will see everything with eyes clarified in a completely different way. Your understanding being fortified from above, it will discover everywhere the brilliant illumination of the divine author of things. You will recognize only wisdom and happiness, wherever men are accustomed to find only vanity and bitterness. You will be content with your creator; you will be enraptured with the vision of his works. Your admiration will not be the effect of ignorance as it is with the vulgar. It will be the fruit of knowledge of the grandeur and marvels of God. Instead of scorning

with men the unravelled secrets, which in earlier times they regarded with astonishment, you will find that when you are admitted into the interior of nature your raptures will go on growing the farther you advance. For you will only be at the beginning of a chain of beauties and delights that go on growing into infinity. The pleasures that enchain your senses and that Circe of your legends who changes men into beasts will have no hold on you, so long as you attach yourself to the beauties of the soul, which never die and never disappoint. You will belong to our fold and will go with us from world to world, from discovery to discovery, from perfection to perfection. With us you will pay court to the supreme being, who is beyond all worlds and fills them without being divided. You will be at once before his throne and among those who are distant from it. For God will establish his seige in your soul and heaven follows him everywhere. Go, therefore, and raise your spirit above all that is mortal and perishable, and cleave only to the eternal truths of the light of God. You will not always live here below, this mortal life which sufficiently approaches that of beasts. There will come a time when you will be delivered entirely of the chains of this body. Use well, therefore, the time that providence gives you here, and seek that your perfections to come will be proportional to the cares you give yourself here in achieving them.”