

# Leibniz on Knowledge and God

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*Abstract:* Scholars have long noted that, for Leibniz, the attributes or Ideas of God are the ultimate objects of human knowledge. In this paper, I go beyond these discussions to analyze Leibniz's views about the nature and limitations of such knowledge. As with so many other aspects of his thought, Leibniz's position on this issue—what I will call his divine epistemology—is both radical and conservative. It is also not what we might expect, given other tenets of his system. For Leibniz, “God is the easiest and the hardest being to know.” God is the easiest to know, in that to grasp some property of an essence is to attain a knowledge of the divine essence, but God is also the most difficult to know, in that “real knowledge” of the divine essence is not available to finite beings. There is an enormous gap between the easy and the real knowledge of God, but for Leibniz, this gap is a good thing, since the very slowness of our epistemological journey prepares us morally for its end.

## I.

**A**n *Epistemological Problem*. Among the many questions that arise for the theist, perhaps none is more difficult than the following epistemological one: in the context of life on earth (that is, prior to physical death), how can human beings, who are so obviously finite and frail, grasp the infinite and supreme Creator? Many theists take the Supreme Being to be evident in the world it created and yet they acknowledge the difficulty involved in grasping any part of the divine essence. The apostle Paul, for example, is perfectly clear about the problem in his epistle to the Romans. On the one hand, he writes that those who have sought the truth “are without excuse” in that “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it [the truth] to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” On the other hand, admits Paul, they “became futile in their thinking and

their senseless minds were darkened” so that “[c]laiming to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:18–23).<sup>1</sup>

Christian philosophers as diverse as Augustine and Aquinas accept this epistemological pessimism. In the *City of God*, Augustine acknowledges that the “human intellect, with its mutability and narrow finitude,” is easily turned away from “the straight and right path” of truth.<sup>2</sup> Nearly nine hundred years later, Aquinas agrees with Augustine that God is fully present in creation, although human beings are incapable of directly witnessing the divine. That pleasure is saved for the blessed. Yet Aquinas does not hesitate to claim that God is fully present in the world. In his *Summa contra gentiles*, he makes the point as follows:

Since every agent intends to introduce its own likeness into its effect, in the measure that its effect can receive it, the agent does this the more perfectly as it is the more perfect itself. . . . Now, God is the most perfect agent. It was His prerogative, therefore, to induce His likeness into created things most perfectly.<sup>3</sup>

For many theists, then, the Supreme Being is supposed to be immanent in the world and the world is taken to be a likeness of God. Nevertheless, for these same theists, it remains equally true that God is beyond the grasp of human beings. As long as the human understanding is trapped in its earthly, corporeal prison, then, how can it possibly progress from its finitude and frailty to infinity and perfection?

A standard answer to this question grew out of some of Plato’s ruminations about knowledge. Plato famously distinguishes between the worlds of being and becoming, where (roughly) the eternal and immutable Ideas constitute the former while the temporary and mutable sensible objects populate the latter. For Plato, then, because the realm of being and the realm of the intelligible are the same, the only objects of knowledge are the Ideas. As Plato makes painfully clear in the *Phaedo*, however, it can be extremely difficult for the human being who is burdened with the weight of becoming to attend to the Ideas. Because the body “keeps us busy in a thousand ways” and “confuses the soul,” it is extremely difficult “to attain

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of the Bible in this paper are from the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV).

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans* 12.18, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin, 1986), 495.

<sup>3</sup> Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 2.45.2, trans. Anton C. Pegis et al., 5 vols. (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), *Book Two: Creation*, trans., with an Introduction and Notes, by James F. Anderson, 136.

what we desire, namely the truth.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, despite its “divine” and “uniform” nature, the soul “imprisoned” in the body struggles to glimpse the eternal and immutable Ideas.<sup>5</sup> Augustine is particularly articulate about this enslavement of the soul by the body. In the struggle of “spirit against flesh [*spiritus versus carnem*]” explains Augustine: “I was enslaved to desire [*libido*],” whose “bondage had me enthralled.”<sup>6</sup>

Early Platonists built a helpful bridge between the human mind and the Ideas. For the Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.–A.D. 50), the Ideas exist both in the mind of God and in the human intellect. For Plotinus (204/5–270), these Ideas are constantly present to us, although we are unaware of them because our surface consciousness is only one level of awareness. From these assumptions, it follows that our finite minds are like the infinite mind of God in that they contain the divine Ideas. Moreover, to grasp the Ideas within us just is to grasp a part of the essence of God.<sup>7</sup> Philo is particularly explicit about the route one must follow to gain a knowledge of the Ideas. Unless we want to be “a fugitive” who has abandoned its “appropriate objects,”<sup>8</sup> we must “dwell in the mind and intellect . . . among the objects of contemplation.”<sup>9</sup> He advises: “seek to become acquainted with yourselves and your own nature, and do not prefer to dwell anywhere else, rather than in yourselves. For by contemplating the things which are to be seen in your own dwelling . . . you will . . . arrive at a correct knowledge of God and of his works. For you will perceive that there is a mind in you and in the universe.”<sup>10</sup> In order to discern God, we need only explore ourselves or “go over to . . . the intellect.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Phaedo* 66a–b, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 57 (hereafter cited as *Complete Works*).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 80b–e, in *Complete Works*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 8.5.11. For the Latin text with English translation, see *Saint Augustine's Confessions*, 2 vols. (Loeb Classical Library [hereafter LCL]), trans. William Watts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977). For a more recent English translation, see the edition of Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 7 vols. (LCL nos. 440–45, 468), ed. and trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966–88). See, for example, *Enneads*, V.4; IV.3.

<sup>8</sup> Philo, *On the migration of Abraham*, XXXVIII, 209–213, in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 273–4 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 214, in *Works*, 274.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, XXXIII, 185–6, in *Works*, 271.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 20, in *Works*, 254. For Philo, the first step in the journey to God is to consider “this invisible chain of harmony and unity, which connects all those parts” of the world (XXXIX, 220, in *Works*, 274).

Augustine also places the objects of knowledge in the human mind. In the *Confessions*, he writes to God:

These books [of the Platonists] served to remind me to return to my own self. Under Your guidance I entered into the depths of my soul. . . . I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the Light that never changes casting its rays over the same eye of my soul, over my mind. . . . What I saw was something quite, quite different from any light we know on earth. . . . It was above me because it was itself the Light that made me, and I was below because I was made by it. All who know the truth know this Light, and all who know this Light know eternity.<sup>12</sup>

In *On the Trinity*, Augustine explains that the possibility of knowledge is grounded in God's intimate presence in the human mind. The mind acquires knowledge, explains Augustine, "by turning towards the Lord, as to the light which in some fashion had reached it even while it had been turned away from him."<sup>13</sup> But even with divine help, "I cannot grasp all that I am. The mind is not large enough to contain itself."<sup>14</sup> For Platonists like Philo and Augustine, the goal of life is to remove oneself as much as possible from the ties to the material world and to contemplate the eternal and immutable Ideas within. Because the mind is mutable and finite, it can never grasp the whole of its contents; with the help of God, however, the human intellect or understanding can grasp some part of it.

That the basic features of Leibniz's epistemology have much in common with Platonists like Philo and Augustine is clear. For Leibniz, the Platonic Ideas are the attributes or Ideas of God, which God used as paradigms to create the world. These same Ideas exist innately within the human mind and therefore constitute the ultimate objects of human knowledge. Scholars have long recognized Leibniz's innatism. What has not been fully explored, however, is the exact nature of the knowledge that Leibniz thinks the frail and finite human being can have of these innate divine Ideas. Two questions, in fact, have not been fully addressed: what at best can we expect at the end of our earthly epistemological journey to God, and what is the means to that end? Given Leibniz's notorious optimism about the rationality and goodness of the world, we would expect his answers to be thoroughly optimistic. They

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16; see also, *ibid.*, 7.20.26.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* 14.15.21. For an English translation of the complete text, see *Saint Augustine: The Trinity* (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 45), trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.8.15.

are not, however, and that in itself is interesting. In order to grasp Leibniz's divine epistemology—that is, his views about the knowledge of God available to the embodied soul—we must first lay a little historical groundwork.

## II.

*Emanation and the Relation between God and Mind.* In Philo's words, God is "in you and in the universe." In order to understand how, for Leibniz, the human mind can find God within, we need to know more about the account Leibniz gives of the relation between God and the mind. To put the point another way, before we address the question as to how, for Leibniz, the finite human mind can grasp its infinite divine cause, it would be helpful to know more about how he articulates the relation that obtains between the finite and the divine minds.

Leibniz's divine epistemology is best understood within the context of emanative causation, a causal theory that itself has a very long history. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are full of claims that God, although transcendent, is in everything, and that everything is in God. In the Book of Psalms, for example, we find the psalmist exclaiming that "thou, O LORD, art most high over all the earth" (Ps. 97:9), and yet we also find that the Lord is intimately related to all things (Ps. 148:3–5). In the New Testament, Paul writes to the Ephesians that there is "one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all" (Eph. 4:6). In the Book of Acts, we are told: "For in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Augustine voices the problem succinctly in the opening paragraphs of the *Confessions*: "Without you, whatever exists would not exist. But does what exists contain you? I also have being . . . which I would not have unless you were in me. Or rather, I would have no being if I were not in you."<sup>15</sup>

The theory of emanative causation was perfectly suited to describe how God could be in creatures, and creatures in God. Here, the basic assumption is that any product of God contains the divine essence but in an inferior way. If the perfect God has an attribute  $f$ , then God can emanate  $f$ -ness to a lower being or creature. In the emanative relation, God loses nothing while the creature comes to instantiate  $f$ -ness. God remains transcendent and pure, while the creature becomes an imperfect manifestation of the perfect  $f$ . The emanative process is assumed to be continual so that the creature will have  $f$  just in case God emanates  $f$ -ness to it. The point here may be summarized as follows: the *Theory of Emanative Causation* claims that, for a being  $A$  that is more perfect than a being  $B$ ,  $A$  can emanate its

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<sup>15</sup> *Confessions* 1.2.2.

attribute *f*-ness to *B* in such a way that neither *A* nor *A*'s *f*-ness is depleted in any way, while *B* has *f*-ness, though in a manner inferior to the way it exists in *A*. The emanative process is continual so that *B* will instantiate *f*-ness if and only if *A* emanates *f*-ness to it.

This account of emanation helps explain how it is that the divine transcends its products and yet is in them. The perfection and transcendence of God remain unchanged, even while the divine continually emanates its attributes to its products, which then have those attributes in an imperfect and hence distinctive manner. The Supreme Being is in its creatures in the sense that it emanates its attributes to them; it remains transcendent from them because it neither loses anything in the emanative process nor gives them any part of itself. In the *Confessions*, Augustine writes:

I considered all the other things that are of a lower order than yourself, and I saw that they have not absolute being in themselves, nor are they entirely without being. They are real in so far as they have their being from you, but unreal in the sense that they are not what you are. For it is only that which remains in being without change that truly is. . . . [God] himself [remains] ever unchanged, all things [are made constantly] new.<sup>16</sup>

For our purposes, the important point here is that the divine attributes exist in created things in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in the divine. God has *f* perfectly; creatures have it imperfectly. The *f*-ness of God is not equivalent to the *f*-ness of the creature. The *f*-ness of the creature is in Augustine's words "of a lower order." The point here may be summarized as follows: the *Creaturely Inferiority Complex* entails that, although creatures are emanations of God and in a sense contain the divine attributes, they are nonetheless inferior to God so that the creatures have the attributes in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in the supreme being.

For most Platonists, the Theory of Emanative Causation had significant epistemological benefits. Plotinus makes the point in a typically dramatic fashion:

For knowledge is a whole, and its parts are such that the whole remains and the parts derive from it. And the seed is a whole and the parts into which it naturally divides derive from it, and each part is a whole and the whole remains an undiminished whole. . . . There [in the whole body of knowledge] all the parts are in a way actual at

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.11.17.

once; so each one which you wish to bring forward for use is ready; but in the part only that which is ready for use is actual; but it is given power by a kind of approach to the whole.<sup>17</sup>

For Plotinus, every part of knowledge “contains also all the other parts potentially” and therefore “the knower in knowing [one part] brings in all the others by a kind of sequence.”<sup>18</sup>

That Leibniz is committed to the Creaturely Inferiority Complex, the Theory of Emanative Causation, and the epistemological implications of the latter is clear. As a young man he embraces these tenets, and they underlie his philosophy for the rest of his philosophical career. For example, in an essay of 1668–69, Leibniz offers his first general account of the relation between God and creatures, which he says is similar to “Plato in the *Timaeus* about the world soul,” to “Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* and *Physics* about the agent Intellect,” to the Stoics and others. Like these other philosophers, he maintains that God is “diffused through everything.”<sup>19</sup> Or consider a particularly succinct presentation of the emanative relation as it appears in the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §14: “it is very evident that created substances depend upon God, who preserves them and who even produces them continually by a kind of emanation, just as we produce our thoughts.”<sup>20</sup> For Leibniz, then, God emanates the divine essence to the human mind (and to every creature), the human mind contains that essence (though in a manner inferior to that of God), and the knowledge the human mind possesses of one “diffusion” of God is to be connected with all the others.

### III.

*Emanation and Creation.* In order to understand Leibniz’s divine epistemology, we need to know more about the particulars of the relation between the Supreme Being and the world that it chose to create. The best place to

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<sup>17</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.9.5 (LCL no. 443), ed. and trans. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 439.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 441 (the gloss within brackets is that of the translator).

<sup>19</sup> A VI, 1, 115.

<sup>20</sup> AG 46. Previous commentators have neither recognized the centrality of emanative causation in Leibniz’s thought, nor discerned its early development. The one exception is Daniel Fouke, who recognizes some aspects of Leibniz’s early Platonism. See his “Emanation and the Perfections of Being: Divine Causation and the Autonomy of Nature in Leibniz,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 76 (1994): 168–94. For more on Leibniz’s views and their sources, see my *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chaps. 5 and 6.

turn for Leibniz's views about these matters is the collection of texts written in the final year of his four-year stay in Paris (1672–76).

Leibniz precisely analyzes the relationship between God and creatures in the *De Summa Rerum* papers, written between late 1675 and late 1676.<sup>21</sup> Placing himself squarely within a long line of Platonists, he defines the divine mind as that which contains the Platonic Ideas. God is “the subject of all absolute simple forms—absolute, that is affirmative.”<sup>22</sup> “Form” here refers to a Platonic Idea or essence, so that God contains all positive essences. Thus, the essence of God can be thought of as “the conjunction in the same subject of all possible absolute forms or perfections.”<sup>23</sup> According to Leibniz, God contains an infinity of such Ideas or forms.

We saw above that, for many theists, every product of God contains the divine essence. Leibniz concurs, and he is keen to elaborate on the precise relation between the attributes of God and the products of divine creation, whether the latter be possible or actual. In *On Forms, or the Attributes of God* of April 1676, he explains: “any property or affection of God involves his whole essence.”<sup>24</sup> He continues: when the attributes of God are “related to one another, modifications result; hence it comes about that the same essence of God is expressed as a whole in any kind of world.”<sup>25</sup> According to the terminology of the *De Summa Rerum* papers, a “modification” is a product of the whole essence of God and in that sense contains all the divine attributes. Individual substances result when these modifications are instantiated in an active subject. He exclaims: “It is a wonderful thing that a subject is different from forms or attributes. . . . Thought is not duration, but what thinks is something that endures. And this is the difference between substance and forms.”<sup>26</sup> That is, because substances are active things, they are the sorts of things that both endure and instantiate properties. “The correct way of considering the matter,” explains Leibniz, “is that forms are conceived through themselves; subjects, and the fact that they are subjects, are conceived through forms.” He continues: “particulars result” when forms “are combined with a subject.”<sup>27</sup> According to Leibniz, a subject is

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<sup>21</sup> These unpublished papers of Leibniz have been given the title *De Summa Rerum*, because as a group they treat questions that cluster around God as the greatest of things, and as the creator. For the entirety of these papers, see A VI, 3. For a subset of them in the original Latin with English translation, see DSR.

<sup>22</sup> A VI, 3, 519/DSR 79.

<sup>23</sup> A VI, 3, 521/DSR 81.

<sup>24</sup> A VI, 3, 514/DSR 69.

<sup>25</sup> A VI, 3, 514/DSR 71.

<sup>26</sup> A VI, 3, 514/DSR 69.

<sup>27</sup> A VI, 3, 514/DSR 71.



that which has a mind or a principle of activity. Each subject or substance will be an instantiated modification of the divine attributes. In brief, God produces modifications through the combinations of the divine attributes or forms and then instantiates these in subjects; because each modification contains the divine essence, so will each created thing.<sup>28</sup>

Leibniz embraces this consequence. In *On the Origin of Things from Forms*, also of April 1676, he writes:

It seems to me that the origin of things from God is of the same kind as the origin of properties from an essence; just as  $6=1+1+1+1+1$ , therefore  $6=3+3$ ,  $=3\times 2$ ,  $=4+2$ , etc. Nor may one doubt that the one expression differs from the other. . . . So just as these properties differ from each other and from essence, so do things differ from each other and from God."<sup>29</sup>

Each created substance is an expression of God's essence and in this sense each has the same essence. But each nonetheless differs from every other because it is a *different* expression of that essence. God creates each substance so that it will express the divine essence in its own way. God chooses among an infinity of such expressions, and then emanates that version of the divine essence to each and every creature. Despite the fact that each creature contains the same essence, each differs from every other in the adequacy of its instantiation of the divine essence.

Nor is Leibniz's account of the relation between God and creatures unorthodox. For help with this point, it is important to remember that according to the Theory of Emanative Causation, each creature is able to contain the divine essence and yet be entirely dependent on God. Moreover, the Creaturely Inferiority Complex explains how each such product or creation of God is able to contain the divine essence and yet be inferior to God. In the *De Summa Rerum* papers, Leibniz explicitly states that it is appropriate to ascribe the features of the divine to the things of the world. For example, he claims that a creature has the immeasurability of God if it can be said to be somewhere; it has the omniscience of God if it can be said to perceive.<sup>30</sup> But he also insists that, strictly speaking, the absolute affirmative attributes of God are not *in* the world. For example, he writes in *On the Origin of Things from Forms* that God "contains the absolute affirmative form that is ascribed in a limited way to other things."<sup>31</sup> For Leibniz, then,

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<sup>28</sup> See A VI, 3, 522–3/DSR 83–5; A VI, 3, 514.

<sup>29</sup> A VI, 3, 518ff./DSR 77.

<sup>30</sup> A VI, 3, 520/DSR 79–81.

<sup>31</sup> A VI, 3, 520/DSR 79.

it is appropriate to ascribe the attributes of God to creatures, but it remains true that “God is not part of our mind” nor is the supreme being in any of the creatures which participate in the divine attributes.<sup>32</sup> In a related essay, Leibniz writes: “all things are in a way contained in all things. But they are contained in a quite different way in God from that in which they are contained in things.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the divine attributes are in creatures but in a limited way.

#### IV.

*The Journey to God’s Essence.* I began section two of this paper with Philo’s claim that God is “in you and in the universe.” Sections two and three revealed how Leibniz conceives the relation between the Supreme Being and the world it creates. For Leibniz, the divine essence is contained in every creature and therefore is everywhere to be discovered. Given this all-pervasive immanence of God, it ought to be an easy task to acquire knowledge of the divine. But of course, things are not quite so simple, for it is here that the epistemological question with which I began this paper raises its ugly head: given human finitude and frailty, how can we possibly grasp the infinity and perfection of God?

Throughout 1676, Leibniz relies on two distinct analogies. One is arithmetical, where the essence of a number, say 6, is compared to God and the various expressions of that essence, say  $3+3$ ,  $2+4$ ,  $1+5$ , are compared to individual substances. The other analogy that Leibniz uses in 1676 is the town analogy, which first occurs in 1668–69 and persists throughout the later philosophy. The point of both analogies is to show how the products of the Supreme Being can instantiate the same essence and yet do so in a way that is different from each other. But the emphasis in the two analogies is slightly different. The focus of the arithmetical analogy is the active individual substance that produces its version of the divine essence. The focus of the town analogy is the subject as a perceiver of the world.<sup>34</sup> Where the arithmetical analogy usually stresses the way in which different created subjects can express the same thing, the town analogy usually emphasizes the fact that the same essence can be grasped in a number of different ways.

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<sup>32</sup> A VI, 3, 520/DSR 81.

<sup>33</sup> A VI, 3, 523/DSR 85. For a more detailed discussion of the metaphysics of the *De Summa Rerum* papers, see my *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, chap. 10.

<sup>34</sup> For the arithmetical analogy, see A VI, 3, 512/DSR 67; A VI, 3, 523/DSR 83; A VI, 3, 519/DSR 77. For the town analogy, see A VI, 3, 573/DSR 95; A VI, 3, 523/DSR 83; A VI, 3, 524/DSR 85; A VI, 3, 400/DSR 115. Leibniz soon ceases to use the former analogy, but uses the latter in some of his most important later works. See, for example, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §9; *Monadology*, §57; *First Truths* (A VI, 4, 1646/AG 33/L 269).

In the town analogy, there is often an epistemological moral: like the traveler whose perception of the town is radically different from the “Ideal” conception available from a tower in the town center, each created mind perceives only one aspect or mode of the divine essence. But the subtle suggestion of the image is that the traveler can enter the town and climb the tower, just as the wise person can attain the beatific vision. The town analogy is supposed to reveal that, for each thinking substance *S*, what the world is for *S* is a divinely arranged set of perceptions and, moreover, that each such set is only one among an infinity of modes of the divine essence where each mode is a way to grasp that essence. In brief, while the arithmetical analogy reveals something about how active creatures express the divine essence, the town analogy displays how the divine essence can be thought or approached in different ways. As Leibniz explains in *On Forms, or the Attributes of God*: “God thinks out infinitely many things in infinitely many ways.”<sup>35</sup> In a striking summary of his view, Leibniz writes at the end of that year:

There is no doubt that God understands how we perceive things; just as someone who wants to provide a perfect conception of a town will represent it in several ways [*modis*]. And this understanding of God, insofar as it understands our way of understanding, is very like our understanding. Indeed our understanding results from it, from which we can say that God has an understanding that is in a way like ours. For God understands things as we do but with this difference: he understands them at the same time in infinitely many ways, whereas we understand them in one way only.<sup>36</sup>

Each human mind perceives the world (and hence God) in a way that is different from every other, and each must seek the divinity from that perspective. The traveler who stands just outside the town wall will grasp much less of the nature of the town than someone who has arrived at its center by meandering through its streets. Like the town, God may be approached in different ways, some of which are better and more direct than others. And, as with the town, the journeyer to God may become lost along the way.

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<sup>35</sup> A VI, 3, 515/DSR 71.

<sup>36</sup> A VI, 3, 400/DSR 115. A number of scholars have taken Leibniz’s use of the Latin term “modus” in the essays of 1676 to be evidence of Spinoza’s influence. While there are texts that do suggest that Leibniz is trying on Spinozistic terminology, the use of the term in passages such as these is perfectly consistent with its use in the *Studies on the Universal Characteristic* which was written in early 1672, significantly before Leibniz knew anything about the *Ethics*. For a discussion of this important text, and of Leibniz’s relation to Spinoza, see my *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, chap. 9; and chap. 10, sec. 5.

## V.

*Leibniz's Divine Epistemology.* The problem remains as to how the weary traveler is supposed to find the right way. Section one of this paper concluded by noting that there are two questions which have not been fully addressed in the literature concerning Leibniz's divine epistemology: what at best can we expect at the end of our earthly epistemological journey to God, and what is the means to that end? Let us treat each of these in turn.

*The End of the Journey.* Throughout his long philosophical career, Leibniz shows an interest in the possibility of a beatific vision. In 1668, he began work on a large project entitled *Catholic Demonstrations* that was to include a discussion of a long list of theological and philosophical topics.<sup>37</sup> It is clear from the outline of the project, which he composed in 1668–69, that he intended to discuss the beatific vision. In his "Conspectus," he writes:

the beatific vision or [*seu*] the intuition of God, face to face, is the contemplation of the universal Harmony of things because GOD or [*seu*] the Mind of the Universe is nothing other than the harmony of things, or [*seu*] the principle of beauty in them.<sup>38</sup>

According to Leibniz, the goal of human life is the recognition of harmony where that is the same thing as the intuition of God: when we "contemplate the universal Harmony of things," we are face to face with the Divine. That is, Leibniz agrees with his Platonist predecessors that God is the single emanative source of all things and that the ascent to God is the recognition of this "Mind" in the world. The beatific vision will occur when we are able to discern God as the harmony of the world. Leibniz writes: "the harmony of things, or the principle of beauty in them" is just God in the world.

At the same time Leibniz was working on his *Catholic Demonstrations*, he was worrying about issues concerning law, justice, and harmony. We find his original reflections on these topics in a series of notes entitled the *Elements of Natural Law*. In the sixth and final essay of this series, written in 1671, Leibniz describes the dominant feature of God's world for the first

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<sup>37</sup> The *Catholic Demonstrations*, which Leibniz began in 1668, was to be a large project containing his views on "the elements of philosophy," on the principles of metaphysics, logic, mathematics, physics, and practical philosophy, and on the Christian mysteries and the authority of the church, among other things. Having composed major parts of this project in the years 1668–69, Leibniz continued to work on it for years, although he never finished it. The "Conspectus," which is an outline of the project as he originally conceived it, was composed during this period.

<sup>38</sup> A VI, 1, 499.

time as a “universal harmony,” which he defines both as “diversity compensated by identity,”<sup>39</sup> and as “identity compensated by diversity.”<sup>40</sup> It follows from this account of the world, explains Leibniz, that because every created thing is an instantiation of the divine essence, to love creatures and to love God is the same thing. The beatific vision will occur when one discerns God in the creatures of the world and loves them accordingly. Leibniz explains part of the motivation behind the *Elements of Natural Law* in a letter of 1671:

I am planning to treat the *Elements of Natural Law* in a short book. . . . I define a good person . . . as one who loves all people. . . . [I define] harmony as diversity compensated by identity. For variety always delights us, once it is reduced to a unity. . . . I show that it is the same thing to love others and to love God, the seat of universal harmony.<sup>41</sup>

The discernment of harmony in the world just is the recognition of the divine essence diversely emanated. Since to discern this harmony among creatures entails that one love them, and since to love them is to love God, a good person is someone who recognizes worldly harmony.

Two closely related questions arise from this analysis: precisely what sort of *knowledge* does the vision afford, and who exactly has it? That is, we need to know more about what sort of epistemological state this is and how to achieve it. The answer to these questions is more complicated than it first appears. On the one hand, Leibniz suggests that the beatific vision is merely a matter of discerning God in the world. In the *Elements of Natural Law*, he explains that our “admiration” and understanding of God will increase as we are “led away from all desire and sadness, and all other affections.” As we remove ourselves from “the constant confusion of human affairs,” we become more and more capable of grasping harmony.<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, Leibniz also suggests that the discernment of harmony requires that we grasp “the infinity” of God. In the sixth essay of the *Elements of Natural Law*, he writes: “*To have real knowledge* is to know” the inner nature of substances. “[N]o one is able to have real knowledge of a single thing, unless he is most wise, that is [*seu*], has real universal knowledge. What it is to have real knowledge, what is called in Latin *Intellegere*, is to read the inner natures.”<sup>43</sup> Against the background of the Theory of

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<sup>39</sup> A VI, 1, 484.

<sup>40</sup> A VI, 1, 477. See also 479.

<sup>41</sup> A II, 1, 173–74/L 150.

<sup>42</sup> A VI, 1, 485. Also see 478, 481.

<sup>43</sup> A VI, 1, 485.

Emanative Causation, Leibniz's reasoning here is relatively clear. For any substance *S*, *S* ultimately contains the same thing as every other substance, namely, the essence of God. As an emanation of the divine essence, *S* contains all the divine attributes which are themselves the materials out of which every modification or product of God is constituted. It follows that to have real knowledge of *S* just is to have knowledge of all the divine attributes. Since to have knowledge of all the divine attributes is to have knowledge of everything, it is not far-fetched to claim that to have real knowledge of one thing is equivalent to having universal knowledge. Moreover, it would seem to follow that to have real knowledge of any substance just is to be "most wise." On this account of knowledge, infinite knowledge would seem to be a necessary condition for real knowledge, and so, given the finitude of the human mind, it would seem to follow that human beings can have no "real knowledge" of God.

The textual evidence for this radical epistemological conclusion comes from early texts. Is there reason to believe that Leibniz maintains this stance? Consider an essay entitled *Von der wahren Theologia mystica*, written in German, probably in the final years of the seventeenth century. In the first part of the essay, Leibniz summarizes the emanative relation between God and creatures, and then acknowledges the epistemological difficulties that follow. He writes:

Every perfection flows immediately from God. . . . Only the inner light which God himself kindles in us has the power to give us a right knowledge of God. The divine perfections are concealed in all things, but very few know how to discover them there. Hence there are many who are learned without being illumined, because they believe not God or the light but only their earthly teachers or their external senses and so remain in the contemplation of imperfections.<sup>44</sup>

We find here the same tension discovered in the early texts. On the one hand, the divine attributes or perfections are in everything in the world, waiting to be "discovered." On the other, they are very difficult to glimpse. In order to find these concealed objects of knowledge, we must escape the world of imperfections and contemplate God.

But how? In *Von der wahren Theologia mystica*, Leibniz makes it clear that the key to his epistemology lies in his metaphysics. Although each created thing or "self-being" is "of God [*Selbstwesen von Gott*], . . . [e]very single self-sufficient thing [*Selbststand*], such as I or you, is a unified, indivisible, indestructible thing."<sup>45</sup> That is, each creature acquires its being from

<sup>44</sup> DS I, 410/L 367. For the complete text in English translation, see L 367–70.

<sup>45</sup> DS I, 411/L 368.

God and yet exists as a separate unified thing. Moreover, Leibniz is clear about the fact that creatures differ from one another in the clarity of their expression of the divine essence: "In each and every creature is everything, but with a certain *degree of clarity* [*Kraft der Klarheit*]."46 In our separateness from God, it becomes difficult to recognize the divinity; in our connectedness to God, it becomes easy. Leibniz summarizes this point by stating that "God is the easiest and the hardest being to know."<sup>47</sup>

In *Von der wahren Theologia mystica*, Leibniz offers clues both about how to attain this easy knowledge and about how to move from that sort to the "hardest" thing to know. The means to "the essential truth" or the divinity in creatures is ourselves. In order to glimpse God, we must turn to our "spirit" or soul and find God there as the "origin" of our substance or "self-being [*Selbstwesen*]."48 The first significant step in this epistemological process is to acquire knowledge of some of the attributes of God: "The knowledge of God is the beginning of wisdom, and the divine attributes are the primary truths for the right order of knowledge."<sup>49</sup> Apparently, knowledge of the divine attributes is the "easy" knowledge; Leibniz also insists, however, that such knowledge is just the first step toward real knowledge. Ultimately, what we seek is "[t]he essential light," which is

the eternal Word of God, in which is all wisdom, all light, indeed the original of all beings and the origin of all truth. Without the radiation of this light no one achieves true faith, and without true faith no one attains blessedness."<sup>50</sup>

Leibniz dramatically summarizes the convergence of his metaphysics and his divine epistemology as follows. In each mind, "there lies an infinity, a footprint or reflection of the omniscience and omnipresence of God."<sup>51</sup> Were we to acquire this "right knowledge of God," we would thereby attain "all wisdom, all light, indeed the original of all beings and the origin of all truth."<sup>52</sup>

We find the epistemological point of *Von der wahren Theologia mystica* essentially in agreement with the *Elements of Natural Law*: because God is contained in every created thing, to have real knowledge of anything is to know everything. It seems clear that human beings in their earthly existence

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. (emphasis added).

<sup>47</sup> DS I, 411/L 367.

<sup>48</sup> DS I, 412/L 368.

<sup>49</sup> DS I, 411/L 367.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> DS I, 411/L 368.

<sup>52</sup> DS I, 410/L 367.

will not attain true knowledge, wisdom, or the beatific vision. In the *Philosopher's Confession* of 1672–73, we find evidence of this epistemological conservatism. Only after death is “the nearly perfect person” capable of conceiving God in the right way. With this cognition, there is “an instantaneous metamorphosis” so that “in a blink of the eye” beatitude occurs.<sup>53</sup>

Our epistemological prognosis does not look good. Although we seem to be able to acquire knowledge of some divine attributes, real knowledge seems to be beyond us. Because finite and frail human beings are incapable of acquiring infinite knowledge, it would seem to follow that they cannot achieve knowledge of God. Is there no way out of this trap?

*The Journey to God.* Yes and no. Despite Leibniz's well-known optimism, he was much more pessimistic than one might predict about the possibility of any thoroughgoing knowledge of the divine. He was inclined to think that human frailty was genuine and that it is therefore impossible to have “real knowledge.” But he was also prepared to offer us some reason for hope. In the *Philosopher's Confession*, he makes a distinction that diminishes the severity of our trap:

Even an accurate cognition [*exacta cognitio*] can increase, not by novelty of matter, but by novelty of reflection. If you have nine units accessible to you, then you have comprehended accurately the essence of the number nine. However, even if you were to have the material for all its properties, nevertheless you would not have its form or reflection [*formam seu reflexionem*]. For even if you do not observe that three times three . . . and a thousand other combinations are nine, you have nonetheless thought of the essence of the number nine. . . . I will give an example of a finite thing representing [*praebentis*] properties that are infinite without any comparison with external things. Here is a circle: if you know that all the lines from the center to the circumference are equal, in my opinion, you consider its essence sufficiently clearly. Still you have not comprehended in virtue of that innumerable theorems.<sup>54</sup>

We have here a distinction between the cognition of the essence of something and its complete cognition. The former consists of the “accurate” understanding of an essential property; the latter involves the cognition of all its properties. In an essay of December, 1675, Leibniz uses different terminology to describe the same distinction:

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<sup>53</sup> A VI, 3, 135.

<sup>54</sup> A VI, 3, 139–40.



we do not have any *idea* of a circle, such as there is in God, who thinks all things at the same time. . . . We think about a circle, we provide demonstrations about a circle, we recognize a circle: its essence is known to us—but only part by part. If we were to think of the whole essence of a circle at the same time, then we would have the idea of a circle.<sup>55</sup>

Leibniz's point may be put as follows: to have complete knowledge of an essence *E* is to know all of its properties. Since, according to Leibniz, every essence of the relevant sort has an infinity of properties, only God can have this sort of knowledge. But finite human beings are capable of having at least *some* knowledge of *E*: when we grasp some property of *E*, we thereby have knowledge of *E*, though it is only partial.<sup>56</sup> By piecing together these and other clues, we attain the following. For any essence *E*, whether infinite or finite, there is a range of possible cognitions of it, from partial to complete, where a partial cognition of *E* is to grasp one of its properties and a complete cognition of *E* is to grasp every such property. Moreover, for any essence *E*, whether infinite or finite, it may be “represented” or “expressed” more or less clearly, although each property of *E* is a partial expression of it.

The bad news is that no finite human being will be able to have a complete cognition of any infinite essence and therefore of any divine attribute. Nor can we have even a partial cognition of the essence of a created substance, since that essence will also be infinite. But we are capable of partial cognitions of attributes of God. For help with this idea, let us return to the arithmetical analogy as used in the *De Summa Rerum* papers. In these essays, Leibniz states that each of a series of expressions ( $3+3$ ,  $2+2+2$ , etc.) is a partial expression or *property* of an essence (in this case, 6). By analogy, each creature is a partial expression or property of God. As Leibniz writes: “Just as the number 3 is one thing, and 1, 1, 1 is another, for 3 is  $1+1+1$ . To this extent the form of the number 3 is different from all its parts; in the same way [created] things differ from God, who is all things.”<sup>57</sup> If I understand  $3+3$ , then I have understood the essence of 6. By analogy, if I have a partial understanding of any property or attribute of God, then I have understood the essence of God—but not the whole essence. Whether I have a partial understanding of  $3+3$ , or a partial understanding of justice, I have only remotely glimpsed the infinite complexity and glory of the divine nature.

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<sup>55</sup> A VI, 3, 462–3/DSR 6–7.

<sup>56</sup> A VI, 3, 577/DSR 99. See also A VI, 3, 578/DSR 101.

<sup>57</sup> A VI, 3, 512/DSR 67.

But I have nonetheless glimpsed the divinity. The arithmetical analogy allows us to see how, despite our finitude and frailty, we are capable of grasping God. If I come to understand a property of justice, then I have a partial cognition of the essence of justice. Since justice is a divine attribute, it follows that I also have a partial cognition of God. Although there is a huge epistemological divide between a partial and a complete understanding of justice, and an even greater one between a partial understanding of justice and a complete understanding of God, it is nonetheless true that to understand any Idea partially is to have a partial understanding of God and hence be on the path toward a more complete knowledge. So, just as to understand a circle fully is to grasp every possible property or expression of its essence, to understand the Supreme Being fully is to grasp every attribute of it.

It is a relief to discover that all knowledge, however partial, is still a knowledge of God, even though the meagerness of this partial knowledge leaves us pitifully remote from the beatific vision and the “real” knowledge accompanying that vision. According to Leibniz, however, we should not despair about the finitude of our epistemological stance. There are at least two reasons for this. First, like Plotinus, Leibniz is committed to the underlying interconnectedness of knowledge such that to know one thing is potentially to know everything. Thus to know the most meager properties of the divine essence does indeed place us squarely on the road to a more complete knowledge. Second, Leibniz suggests that slow but steady (epistemological) steps are morally appropriate. In an essay that was probably written in 1675, he states: “It is a great boon to the human race that infinite things resist” our finite understandings. Because of our limited understandings, we cannot so easily “crawl straight into the middle of the brambles” where we would become lost. Rather, our finite understanding forces us to struggle morally in the appropriate way. The suggestion is that the development of happiness and the increase of knowledge are closely related, and that we need to learn to be happy in the right manner before we are prepared to acquire more knowledge. It is therefore a *good* thing that “the human race progresses towards improvement only gradually.” Moreover, despite our finite understanding and meager knowledge, “a certain happiness is already in our power,” and it is this happiness that deserves careful augmentation.<sup>58</sup> In a related essay of 1676, entitled *On the Happy Life*, Leibniz offers us an account of a happy or tranquil life. To be tranquil, explains Leibniz, we must carefully follow “the dictates of reason,” assiduously avoid being led astray by “passions and appetites,” and content

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<sup>58</sup> A VI, 3, 428–9.

ourselves with the goods that we possess. In short, we will attain “tranquility of the Soul” when we accustom ourselves to our lot in life and reflect on what we know.<sup>59</sup> Tranquility and reflection will encourage greater happiness and more complete knowledge.

## VI.

*Conclusion.* In his typical fashion, Leibniz offers an enormously clever answer to an extremely difficult question, and he constructs his answer in agreement with many of the great philosophers of the past.<sup>60</sup> Leibniz agrees with Augustine and Aquinas in claiming both that the created world is a likeness of God, and that genuine knowledge of the divine attributes is not possible prior to death, given human frailty and finitude. Like Philo, Plotinus, and many other Platonists, he maintains that the divine attributes are available to be grasped if we just remove ourselves from “the shadow world” in the right way.<sup>61</sup> And like Plotinus, he believes that each “part” of knowledge “contains also all the other parts potentially.”

At the outset of this paper, I claimed that Leibniz’s divine epistemology is both radical and conservative. Leibniz is conservative in that he thinks that no real knowledge of God is possible in our earthly existence. He is radical in the sense that he seems to consider this epistemological limitation a good thing; he is also radical in thinking that all knowledge of the Ideas is knowledge of the divine. Furthermore, insofar as the ultimate goal of knowing the divine essence cannot be reached in our earthly existence, Leibniz is pessimistic, but he is optimistic insofar as he regards each epistemological step that is taken along the way in this life as a means to happiness and moral goodness.

In order to glimpse God, all we have to do is to have a momentary insight in any area of knowledge. Because even the lowest level cognition of an essence (say,  $6 = 3+3$ ) is a partial cognition of God, it behooves us to understand as many of the divine attributes as we can. One of Leibniz’s professors, Erhard Weigel (of Jena) makes the point in the following way. “Not only has our intellect always known the [first] truths themselves from within its very own nature as permitted by the extraordinary *Divine Authority*, but first it understands [them] most directly just as they are in

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<sup>59</sup> A VI, 3, 636.

<sup>60</sup> In my *Leibniz’s Metaphysics*, I argue that Leibniz was committed to building his philosophy out of elements drawn from the writings of past philosophers.

<sup>61</sup> For an interesting discussion of the dangers of the “shadows,” see especially the *Philosopher’s Confession* of 1672–73 at A VI, 3, 116–49.

themselves and then it begins all its scientific discourse and it ultimately ends it [the discourse] in them.”<sup>62</sup> For Weigel and for many thinkers before him, the human intellect learns about itself and about God in examining the eternal truths.

Leibniz turns the proposals of Weigel (and others like him) into a tidy answer to the ancient question with which I began this paper. Where the question is, given human frailty and finitude, how can we grasp the infinite and perfect God? Leibniz’s answer is both subtle and profound: when we consider “the footprint” of God in our minds and manage to grasp some property of an attribute of God, we have thereby grasped some part of God’s essence. All such knowledge is knowledge of God, and is the first step toward universal knowledge and the beatific vision. But this partial knowledge is not “real” knowledge. Human finitude can find its way to the path of truth, but it cannot progress very far along its way. As Leibniz states in *Von der wahren Theologia mystica*, “God is the easiest and the hardest being to know.” And yet for Leibniz, the enormous gap between easy and hard knowledge is a good thing in that it encourages moral development and reflection. In the end, the very slowness of our epistemological journey prepares us for its end. As he writes in the *Philosopher’s Confession*:

And just as the blessed, once having been admitted to God, that is, to the universal harmony and the supreme reason, by continual increments in all infinity, and having grasped it as if concentrated in a single stroke of vision, nevertheless have a delight without end because they multiply it infinitely by a more distinct reflection on the parts of their joy—since there is no thought, and accordingly, no pleasure without perpetual novelty and progress.<sup>63</sup>

Given our finitude and frailty, we cannot proceed to God except by small increments. And yet, given our finitude and frailty, those small, steady steps are the best way to travel.

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<sup>62</sup> Erhard Weigel was a well-known and influential philosopher in Jena. This quotation is from one of his most important works, *Analysis Aristotelica ex Euclide restituta* of 1658, 108.

<sup>63</sup> A VI, 3, 139. I would like to thank Robert Sleight for allowing me to see a copy of his translation of the *Philosopher’s Confession*, which has made work on that difficult text much easier. Sleight’s translation of this and related texts will appear shortly as a volume in the Yale Leibniz series.