

Note X

On the Definition of Love

We have seen the extent to which Leibniz occupied himself with constructing tables of definitions (Chap. 5, §23) and the importance he attached to the invention of good definitions, intended to serve as the foundation for demonstrations (Chap. 6, §5).¹ He had such confidence in the judicious choice of logical definitions that he thought that by this means alone he could resolve all obscure or doubtful questions. The most curious example of this is provided by his definition of love, which he often recalled with satisfaction. He had discovered it early on, for we find it already in his *Definition of Universal Justice*.² As is shown by his first letter to Arnauld (1671?), it was to have formed part of his *Elements of Natural Law*: “I intend to explain the *elements of natural law* in a short book in which everything will be demonstrated from definitions alone. I define a good or just man as one who loves all; love, as the pleasure derived from the happiness of another.”³

It is found again in the lists of moral definitions compiled for the encyclopedia,⁴ in the letter to Arnauld of 23 March 1690 where Leibniz sums up the principal theses of his philosophy,⁵ and finally in the Preface to the *Diplomatic Code of the Law of Nations* (1693): “We may define *justice* as the charity of the wise.... *Charity* is universal benevolence, and *benevolence* the habit of loving or esteeming. But to *love* or to *esteem* is to be pleased by the happiness of another, or, what amounts to the same thing, to adopt another’s happiness as one’s own.”⁶

These ideas had been suggested to Leibniz in his youth by his reading of the book of Father Frédéric Spee (1591-1635) on the three divine virtues, which the Elector of Mainz had recommended to him and which he very much enjoyed. This is what he later declared to the Electress Sophie when sending her the translation he had done of the book’s preface.⁷

¹ Cf. his letter to Galloys, 1677 (*Math.*, I, 179), quoted p. 281, note.

² See Note IX.

³ *Phil.*, I, 73.

⁴ *Phil.*, VII, 73, 75; LH IV 7B, 2, Bl. 11-14; LH IV 8 Bl. 4-5; Mollat, pp. 28ff, 35ff, 63, etc. See *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), §4 (*Phil.*, IV, 429).

⁵ *Phil.*, II, 136.

⁶ *Phil.*, III, 386-7; Klopp, VI, 470. Cf. Leibniz to the Duke of Hanover (*Phil.*, VII, 27); Leibniz to Landgrave Ernst Hesse-Rheinfels, 4/14 September 1690 (Rommel, II, 232); Leibniz to Madame de Brinon, 9/19 May 1691 (Foucher de Careil, I, 143-4; Klopp, VII, 110-1).

⁷ *Dialogue on the Nature of the Three Divine Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity, Translated from the German of Father Spee, Placed at the Beginning of His Book on the Three Divine Virtues* (Klopp, VIII, 67-84). Cf. *Tribute to Father Frédéric Spee, S. J.*, May 1677 (Klopp, VIII, 62); the praise of Spee’s *Guldenes Tugendbuch* in a letter to the Landgrave of 1680 (Rommel, I, 253); and a “digression” in the *Theodicy*, §§96-97, in which Leibniz recalls that Father Spee had the singular merit of opposing the prosecution of witchcraft in an anonymous book entitled *Cautio Criminalis Circa Processus Contra Sagas*, and of converting to his views of tolerance the Elector of Mainz, who had recounted this fact to Leibniz. Klopp conjectures that it was Leibniz himself who, following this example and advancing this precedent, had in turn converted the dukes of Hanover (Klopp, IV, xxix). As Leibniz writes in the *Theodicy*, “the memory of this excellent man must be precious to persons with knowledge and good sense,” for it is to him

Leibniz flattered himself to have resolved with this definition the tricky and controversial question of self-interested and disinterested love: “From this is solved the difficult problem, of the greatest importance also in theology, of how there may be disinterested love, which is free of expectation and fear and of every consideration of utility....”⁸

Thus, when there arose the famous quarrel between Fénelon and Bossuet over quietism, which bore precisely on the “pure love” of God, Leibniz proposed to his various correspondents the solution that he had discovered earlier,⁹ and it is with regard to this that he wrote the letter we have just recalled to the Electress Sophie.¹⁰

With an analogous controversy being carried on in England between Mr. Sherlock and Mr. Norris, in which some ladies versed in philosophy, Mistress Astell (or Miss Ash)¹¹ and Lady Masham,¹² were involved, Leibniz seized this new opportunity to recommend his definition as the only means of resolving the debate.¹³ He did not fail to propose it in the polite gatherings in which love was discussed, and he gallantly declared that “it is reasonable that ladies pass judgment on matters of love.”¹⁴ He applied it even to works of art and to beauty, in order to explain the disinterested character of aesthetic pleasure.¹⁵ He wrote sometime later: “I have frequently been astonished that there has been such a dispute over pure love without giving an intelligible definition of love. For in considering what authors ordinarily say about it, one finds that they explain the obscure through the equally obscure. It is this that I have tried to remedy, and I have always taken great care to give definitions.”¹⁶

Later, when Malebranche had been attacked for his doctrine of the action of created things, Leibniz said: “I fear that this is a battle similar to that which at other times

that there chiefly falls the merit that is generally attributed to Bekker and Thomasius, who were after him the apostles of tolerance in Germany (see Lévy-Brühl, *L'Allemagne depuis Leibniz*).

⁸ *Phil.*, III, 387. Cf. *Dissertation II, Prefixed to the Second Part of the Diplomatic Code of the Law of Nations*, §X: “On the love of God that is disinterested but concerns the good of the beloved and nonetheless depends on the motive of one’s own good” (Dutens, IV.iii, 313).

⁹ See Leibniz to Nicaise, 1697-99 (*Phil.*, II, 569-70, 573, 576-80, 580-2, 584, 586-7, 590); Leibniz to Burnett, 8/18 May 1697, 20/30 January 1699 (*Phil.*, III, 207, 253); Leibniz to Malebranche (who prepared a treatise on pure love), 13/23 March 1699 (*Phil.*, I, 357-8); *New Essays*, II.xx.5; Leibniz to Hansch, 25 July 1707 (Erdmann, 446b); Remarks on the *Characteristics* of Lord Shaftesbury, in an appendix to the letter to Coste of 30 May 1712 (*Phil.*, III, 425); *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §§9, 16, 18.

¹⁰ *Phil.*, VII, 546-50; Klopp, VIII, 56ff.

¹¹ *Phil.*, II, 569 and 579, notes.

¹² Daughter of the philosopher Ralph Cudworth and correspondent of Leibniz from 1703 to 1705 (*Phil.*, III, 333ff).

¹³ Leibniz to Coste (who sent him his translation of Lady Masham’s book on the love of God, directed against Mr. Norris), 4 July 1706 (*Phil.*, III, 382).

¹⁴ Leibniz to Nicaise, 28 May 1697 (*Phil.*, II 569, 580). Cf. Leibniz to the Electress Sophie (*Phil.*, VII, 546). He often speaks rather disdainfully of Madame Guyon and treats her as an ignorant devout. By contrast, he cites with praise Mr. Norris and Mademoiselle de Scudéry, with whom he had exchanged verses. See Leibniz’s Latin epigram on Mademoiselle de Scudéry’s parrot, and the response of the latter in French verse (Guhrauer, II, 415-6); and the *Short Biography of Fräulein von Scudery* (ibid., 416ff). After the Peace of Ryswyck, he had sent her a poem in French (dated 15/25 November 1697) intended for Louis XIV, in order to engage him in peaceful undertakings (Klopp, V, 175, and xxxvi). See Leibniz to Mlle. de Scudéry, 17 November 1697 (Dutens, I, 738), and 11/21 January 1698 (Klopp, V, 180).

¹⁵ Leibniz to Nicaise (*Phil.*, II, 381); Leibniz to Coste (a painting by Raphael) (*Phil.*, III, 387); Leibniz to the Electress Sophie (*Phil.*, VII, 546).

¹⁶ Leibniz to Coste, 4 July 1706 (*Phil.*, III, 384).

engaged minds in France over pure love. A good definition (like I have given of love) would have extracted them from the affair.

Great struggles
Cease checked when a little dust is thrown.”¹⁷

Thus until the end of his life Leibniz maintained this absolute confidence in the usefulness and efficacy of good definitions. Without question, as he immediately adds, “when one does not fix ideas, there is much room for arguing for and against.” But he perhaps deceived himself in claiming to put an end to every dispute by the simple choice of a definition, however apt and ingenious it might be; for even if definitions are indemonstrable,¹⁸ they are nonetheless not arbitrary,¹⁹ and consequently may be debated and contested. The proof of this is that he himself, while blaming philosophers for “being insufficiently attached to properly formulating the definitions of terms,”²⁰ reproached Spinoza for having given a definition of substance that no one recognized.²¹

¹⁷ Leibniz to Bourguet, 22 March 1714 (*Phil.*, III, 567) [quoting Virgil, *Georgics*, IV.86-7]. Cf. *Reflections on the Declaration of War that France Has Made to the Empire* (December 1688): “It is said that swarms of angry bees completely give up their fury when one throws a little dust on them: ‘They cease, dispersed when a little dust is thrown’” (Klopp, V, 610).

¹⁸ *Conversation with Eckhard*, 5 April 1677 (*Phil.*, I, 212).

¹⁹ See Chapter 6, §7.

²⁰ Leibniz to Nicaise, 4/14 May 1698 (*Phil.*, II, 580).

²¹ Leibniz to De Volder, 6 September 1700 (*Phil.*, II, 213).