
Prémontval's "General Misunderstanding on the Question of Optimism"

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Abstract: One of the most original contributions to the optimism debate of the eighteenth century was put forward by the maverick French Enlightenment thinker, André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval (1716-1764), in an essay entitled "General misunderstanding on the question of optimism" (published 1757). This essay, which seeks to develop a "middle point" between the polarized pro- and anti-optimist positions that characterized the optimism debate, prefigures the development of process or neoclassical theism in important ways. The essay is presented here in English for the first time, along with an analysis of the essay itself and of the context in which it was written.

Keywords: Optimism, Best possible world, Prémontval, Leibniz, Berlin Academy, Academy prize essays, Creation, Process philosophy.

Introduction

We are fortunately in an age which recognizes that noteworthy and original philosophical contributions were not the exclusive preserve of so-called canonical thinkers. One such contribution is to be found in the essay which is the focus of this paper, namely "General misunderstanding on the question of optimism" by the maverick French Enlightenment thinker, André-Pierre Le Guay de Prémontval (1716-1764). The essay was written sometime between the second half of 1755 and 1757, at a time when the question of optimism, that is, whether our world is the best possible, was much agitated, especially in Germany, where Prémontval had resided since 1752. By way of an introduction to this text, which is presented here in English for the first time, I shall provide a short account of Prémontval's career in Berlin's Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres (section I), followed by an account of the Academy prize question on optimism, which served as a stimulus for Prémontval's essay (section II), and lastly an analysis of the essay itself (section III). A complete English translation of the essay is provided as an appendix.

I. Prémontval and the Berlin Academy

Prior to his arrival in Berlin in 1752, Prémontval had led an interesting if undistinguished life. In 1737, at the age of 21, he made something of a name for himself as a self-styled Professor of Mathematics in his home city of Paris,

offering free lectures on arithmetic, algebra, and geometry in a room in his own house. These ended in 1744 where he departed for Switzerland, and over the next eight years he would move to Germany and then to Holland, supporting himself by working as a proof-reader and publishing a number of books, such as *L'esprit de Fontenelle* [The Spirit of Fontenelle] (1744),¹ a selection of choice extracts from Fontenelle's writings, *Memoires* [Memoirs] (1749),² *Panagiana panurgica, ou le faux evangeliste* [Rascal Panage, or the False Evangelist] (1750),³ a virulent critique of François Vincent Toussaint's book *Les moeurs* [Manners] (1748),⁴ and lastly a 3-volume work entitled *La Monogamie* [Monogamy] (1751-2),⁵ featuring a defence of the traditional institution of marriage against various scriptural and philosophical arguments in favour of polygamy. While living in The Hague, Prémontval's wife received an offer of employment from Princess Wilhelmina of Hesse-Kassel (1726-1808), which prompted the couple to depart for a new life in Berlin on 14 February 1752.

On the strength of his published work, Prémontval was nominated as a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres shortly after his arrival in Berlin. The Academy had started life as the Royal Society of Sciences, founded in 1700 by polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), but for decades was plagued by insufficient funding and poor leadership. The Society's fortunes changed dramatically in 1740 following a sweeping reorganization by the Prussian king Frederick II (1712-1786), which brought in renowned figures such as Pierre-Louis Maupertuis (1698-1759), as perpetual president, and mathematician Leonhard Euler (1707-1783), and saw the approval of new statutes and funding as well as the creation of an annual prize essay contest on a topic selected by the Academy's members. In 1743 the Society was renamed the Royal Academy of Sciences and Belles-Lettres, and its members were divided into four classes: experimental philosophy, mathematics, speculative philosophy, and *belles-lettres*. Although the works he had published prior to his arrival in Berlin would have made Prémontval a good fit in the class of *belles-lettres*, he opted instead to join the class of speculative philosophy,⁶ explaining that this reflected an interest in metaphysics he had been cultivating for twenty years.⁷

Prémontval became a full member of the Academy on 29 June 1752, and a week later delivered his inaugural lecture, or memoir, a rather fawning speech in which he gave lengthy praise to the Academy, the talents of the other academicians, and the merits of Frederick II.⁸

Prémontval's second memoir, delivered 19 October 1752, was nowhere near as anodyne. Entitled "A preliminary memoir *on the difficulties against the existence of God*," it concerned the question of whether it was permissible to raise objections against proofs (or even accepted "truths") that one does not know how to resolve.⁹ The aim of such an exercise, Prémontval explained, was to clear away bad proofs and thus inspire the invention of new solutions in order to put the truths on a firmer footing. Despite its title, Prémontval's main target in this memoir was not the "truth" of the existence of God *per se*, but rather one of the most popular proofs used to establish it, a proof that today would fall within the class of arguments called design arguments. The memoir culminated with Prémontval attacking a variation of the proof developed by Maupertuis,¹⁰ based on the principle of least action, a principle that Maupertuis himself had discovered.

The brazen attack on both the Academy's president (whose patronage Prémontval enjoyed) as well as a highly respected proof for God's existence set a precedent for what was to follow. Within eighteen months, Prémontval had delivered stinging attacks on the thought of the two most renowned figures of German philosophy at the time, namely Leibniz and Christian Wolff (1679-1754), accusing the former of fatalism and the latter of basing his philosophy on circular definitions.¹¹ The frontal assault on Wolff is all the more surprising given the support that Wolff commanded in the Academy, not least in the form of its perpetual secretary, Samuel Formey (1711-1797). Not wishing to spare any of the Academy's heavyweights, Prémontval also initiated a short-lived but fractious exchange with Leonard Euler about the latter's attempt to deduce God's existence from the structure of the human eye, with which Prémontval was decidedly unimpressed.¹² In another series of memoirs entitled *Pensées sur la liberté* [Thoughts on Freedom], Prémontval identified numerous difficulties in supposing that human free will was compatible with the traditional notion of God, difficulties he deliberately left unresolved.

Prémontval's preparedness to unsettle deep-seated beliefs and his unwillingness to respect reputations did not sit well with his fellow academicians, who often overlooked his work for publication in the Academy's annual proceedings, the *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Berlin*. As the Academy seemed happy to let Prémontval deliver his memoirs but not publish them, he felt compelled to make alternative arrangements for their dissemination. This led him to publish no fewer than six books between 1754 and 1757.¹³ The first of these, appearing in March 1754,¹⁴ was *Thoughts on Freedom*, which drew together three memoirs of the same name that had been delivered at the Academy shortly before.¹⁵ Two further books followed in 1754, *Le Diogene de d'Alembert; ou Diogene decent* [The Diogenes of d'Alembert, or, Decent Diogenes],¹⁶ and *De Dieu & de la Religion* [On God and Religion],¹⁷ both of which were short compilations of discrete articles, ranging from a single sentence to several pages in length, on a variety of subjects.¹⁸ In March 1755 Prémontval published a further provocative work entitled *Du hazard sous l'empire de la providence* [On Chance under the Rule of Providence],¹⁹ in which he argued for the reality of

chance (understood as the exclusion of all necessity and intention) in the universe. All four of these books were envisaged as part of—or spin-offs from—a larger series entitled *Philosophiques protestations et déclarations* [Philosophical Protestations and Declarations]. Prémontval's initial plan (in 1754) was that one volume of this series would be published each year, with the first one to be entitled *Academic Works*, rounding up all of the memoirs he had delivered at the Academy.²⁰ However, a bout of ill-health led to delays in publication,²¹ and when the first two volumes did finally appear in 1757 they did not correspond to what Prémontval had originally envisaged.²² Now entitled *Vues Philosophiques; ou protestations et déclarations sur les principaux objets des connoissances humaines* [Philosophical Views, or Protestations and Declarations on the Principle Objects of Human Knowledge],²³ the two volumes contained a mixture of writings: nestling alongside a selection of some of the memoirs he had delivered at the Academy were a few specially-written essays, a number of letters, and extracts from two of his earlier books, *Memoirs* and *Diogenes*. Courting controversy once more, Prémontval rather provocatively described the essence of his *Philosophical Views* as "Universal Protestantism,"²⁴ even though he there endorsed a very unorthodox conception of God, claiming that his God was not outside time, or free, or a creator. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Prémontval's *Philosophical Views* was placed on the index of prohibited books in 1761.²⁵

Although his spate of book publishing ended in 1757, Prémontval continued to be a productive member of the Academy until his death in 1764. In his twelve years as a member, he attended 356 sessions of the Academy,²⁶ in that time delivering 26 memoirs, all but one of which were published. Prémontval also played a full part in the intellectual life of the Academy, including sitting on the jury on some for the annual prize essay contests, such as the 1755 contest on optimism.²⁷

II. The Academy Prize Question on Optimism

In the 1740s and 1750s, the anti-Leibnizian faction of the Academy, led by Maupertuis and Euler, often used the prize contest to solicit (and reward) essays that were critical of Leibniz's philosophy. In 1745 Leibniz's doctrine of monads was chosen as the topic of the essay contest; in 1749 his determinism; and in 1753 it was decided that the focus of the contest of 1755 would be optimism; the official minutes of the Academy for 7 June 1753 record the decision:

The question proposed for the prize of 1755 was stated in these terms.

We request an examination of Pope's system, contained in the proposition "All is good".

It is a matter of: (1) determining the true meaning of that proposition according to the hypothesis of its author; (2) comparing it with the system of optimism, or the choice of the best, to indicate the connections and differences between them; (3) lastly, to put forward arguments that will be thought most fitting to confirm or destroy this system.²⁸

Announcement of the contest prompted a number of complaints. Johann Christoph Gottsched published a short tract against what he perceived to be the negative and trivializing tone of the Academy's question.²⁹ Another attack came from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn, who ridiculed the juxtaposition of Pope and Leibniz in the Academy's question, noting that the aims and approaches of the poet and philosopher were too different to warrant the sort of comparison the Academy proposed.³⁰ Nevertheless, these concerns were not widely shared, judging from the number of entries the academy received: at least eighteen.³¹ Of these, only one is known to have been sympathetic to optimism,³² this being a highly unoriginal piece containing little more than a statement of Leibniz's own arguments for optimism and an account of his responses to objections. Despite its lack of novelty, this piece won the support of the Academy's small Wolffian contingent, but was eventually awarded second place to appease Maupertuis, who had insisted the prize be given to an essay critical of Leibniz's philosophy.³³ The prize was thus awarded to the essay by Adolf Friedrich Reinhard (1726-1783), chamber secretary to the Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz.

Reinhard's essay attacked optimism on two fronts. The first objection charges that Leibniz's doctrine strips God of free will, while the second is directed at Leibniz's claim that there is a single best possible world, which Reinhard dubs "the dogma of the unique greatest perfection."³⁴ The first objection focuses on Leibniz's insistence that God's perfect nature is such that he would choose to create no other world than the best, to which Reinhard responds: "If God's perfections contain the determining reason of his volitions then there is no longer any freedom; all his actions are as necessary as mathematical truths."³⁵ The second objection, which is unique to Reinhard, seeks to establish that an intelligent being's primary end, or chief goal, is usually served by multiple secondary or tertiary ends, and that all of these ends can be attained in many different ways. This is true also for world-creation, he supposes, since in addition to the many different primary and secondary ends God could propose, there are likely many different ways of attaining each and every one of them and the optimist is in no position to deny that some of these will be just as good as others, leading to worlds of equal perfection.³⁶ Hence there is no single best world and thus no requirement for God to create one world in particular.

Reinhard's essay prompted a number of responses. The Academy's perpetual secretary, Samuel Formey, found Reinhard's reasoning so weak that he was uncharacteristically moved to insert a critical review of the winning essay in one of the journals under his editorial control.³⁷ A pre-critical Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) published a short essay that sought to show, pace Reinhard, that the notion of a single best world was perfectly coherent.³⁸ Prémontval, who was on the voting committee for the 1755 prize essay, opted for a more direct approach, writing to Reinhard to tell him that despite his misgivings about Reinhard's essay he had voted for it anyway, neglecting to mention that in so doing he had bowed to pressure from Maupertuis.³⁹ Prémontval also sent Reinhard a lengthy point-by-point rebuttal of the prize-winning es-

say, later publishing both his letter and his rebuttal in volume 2 of his *Philosophical Views*.⁴⁰ The essay "General misunderstanding on the question of optimism" was written to serve as a sort of preface to these two pieces, Prémontval using the opportunity to sketch out his own views and present them as the middle point between the sharply pro- or anti-optimist positions he had encountered in the essays submitted to the Academy's prize contest. Prémontval was clearly dismayed that no one else had hit upon this "middle point", and this despite him effectively outlining it in three of the books he had published between 1754 and 1755, namely *Thoughts on Freedom*, *The Diogenes of d'Alembert*, and *On Chance under the Rule of Providence*. Curiously, in the "General misunderstanding" essay he also suggests that this spate of book publishing was undertaken in the hope that it would lead some of the competition's entrants to arrive at the same "middle point" position he favoured, though by his own admission this did not happen, the entrants being clearly polarized, either fervently in favour of optimism or against it. What, then, was Prémontval's "middle point"?

III. Prémontval's "General misunderstanding on the Question of Optimism"

Prémontval reaches his "middle point" by drawing a sharp distinction between these two propositions:

- (1) God essentially chooses the best among all the possibles.
- (2) The world is the best of all possible worlds.

He rightly notes that those who took part in the optimism debate typically conflated the two, or at best construed (2) as the logical consequence of (1). Against this, however, Prémontval claims that while (1) is necessarily true, (2) is completely false. The first proposition must be accepted since it is of the essence of an all-wise, all-powerful and all-good being to always choose the greatest good or best course. But the second proposition must be rejected on the grounds that our world could clearly be better, for example if a person who has chosen to sin instead chose not to sin or if a person who has chosen not to perform a good action instead chose to perform it.

Prémontval harmonizes his acceptance of (1) and rejection of (2) by offering a philosophical theology that is clearly influenced by Plato's *Timaeus* or Timaeus of Locri's *On the Nature of the World and the Soul*, in particular by their account of the formation of the cosmos by the divine craftsman, the demiurge. Both Plato and the author writing as Timaeus of Locri suppose that the demiurge acts on pre-existing matter that is by nature disorderly, chaotic, and unpredictable. In conferring order upon this material the demiurge seeks to bring about the best arrangement, though as the material has natural properties that are in opposition to the order imposed on it, the effects of these properties can only be partially subjugated by the demiurge, never wholly eradicated.⁴¹ In a similar vein, Prémontval envisages God as being faced with a world of beings he had not created and over which he does not have direct control, though in his account this is because some or all of these beings are naturally endowed

with free will, which God cannot override or remove even if he wanted to. Prémontval identifies God's principal (and indeed overriding) aim as to make all beings holy and happy as quickly as possible, on the grounds that no other aim is consistent with perfect goodness. But because other beings have free will, which is inviolable, God is unable to make all happy and holy by fiat. Instead, he is restricted to guiding these beings to his goal of universal happiness and holiness through the administration of punishments and rewards. As the universe is still a long way from its perfected state, Prémontval rejects the suggestion that it is the best possible, opting instead for a more nuanced position. While he accepts that the world is the best as regards that which depends upon God, who ensures that the world contains as much perfection at each moment as is possible, he holds that it is not best as regards that which depends upon free beings, though he envisages these beings improving continuously under the guidance of God, who seeks to remove as much imperfection from the whole as possible. Although Prémontval describes himself as an optimist, he is perhaps more accurately described as a meliorist, even if there are clear strains of optimism in his thought.

At the heart of Prémontval's philosophical theology is the belief that God's aim is to make all beings holy and happy as quickly as possible.⁴² He was quite bemused by those who insinuated that this might be subordinated to some other, more important aim. For example, in his *Theodicy*, Leibniz had claimed that while the happiness of intelligent beings "is the principal part of God's design,"⁴³ it should not be thought that this was his sole aim. Leibniz stressed that God would also prize simplicity of means and the observation of general laws, intimating that this would result in a certain amount of evil ("God can follow a simple, productive, regular plan; but I do not believe that the best and the most regular is always opportune for all creatures simultaneously").⁴⁴ In response, Prémontval simply notes that it would take just one act of will for God to establish as a general law that all be happy and holy. Moreover, this act of will would be no more complex than anything else he might will, or, if it was, a perfectly good God would not be deterred from it, as nothing is more important than the happiness and holiness of his creatures. Leibniz and his fellow optimists had therefore erred by supposing that God's wisdom had identified more important considerations than the happiness and holiness of other beings.

On the other hand, opponents of optimism erred by denying that God essentially chooses the best. Such a denial typically stemmed from the concern that if God essentially chooses the best then he must do so necessarily, which destroys divine freedom at a stroke. To counter this, some opponents of optimism, such as Reinhard, insisted that God was entirely free in his choice of world, and indeed free to choose whether to create or not, it being a matter of complete indifference to him whether other beings existed or not.⁴⁵ Prémontval's response is twofold. First, he notes that as goodness is a propensity to do good, God's essential goodness *presupposes* the existence of things outside of him to which he can do good, implying that it was not up to God whether these things existed or not.⁴⁶ (The same argument would later be used

by twentieth century process or neoclassical theists to reject the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.)⁴⁷ Second, Prémontval insists that an infinite goodness that was in any way indifferent towards the good of other beings was not worthy of the name of infinite goodness, or indeed worthy of our love.

For all its ingenuity, Prémontval's attempt to influence the optimist debate was not successful. First and foremost, the philosophical theology Prémontval sketched out in "General misunderstanding", and more obliquely in the books he published in 1754 and 1755, was too heterodox to win widespread support. His rejection of the doctrine of creation as an unhelpful theological prejudice would have been seen as abhorrent in an age in which orthodoxy was still prized. And his claim that God's principal aim was the happiness and holiness of his creatures was at odds with the mainstream Christian confessions, which typically saw God's sole aim as the glorification of himself, something that was quite compatible with the misery and even damnation of many creatures. Prémontval's willingness to consider God's principal aim to be the happiness and holiness of his creatures would no doubt have been seen as the error of a philosopher working out the logic of God's goodness and love independently of any other theological or scriptural concerns, which may well have been precisely how he arrived at it. As Prémontval relates in his memoirs, when he began studying philosophy at the age of 16 or 17 he underwent a crisis of faith that led to him to endorse atheistic Pyrrhonism, before turning to deism and eventually converting to an unspecified branch of Protestantism at the age of 30.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, his writings suggest that he continued to entertain a philosophical notion of God over one that was recognizably Lutheran or Calvinist, a point that was not lost on his critics who castigated him for it.⁴⁹ But while Prémontval's philosophical theology failed to find adherents in his own age, something like it would be entertained again in the twentieth century, when similar ideas became key planks in process or neoclassical theism.⁵⁰⁻⁵¹

Appendix: Prémontval's "General Misunderstanding on the Question of Optimism"⁵²

There is no subject to which I ought to bring back my reader more frequently, and with more desire to please (happy, if I can share this keen interest with him!) than that of *optimism*, or the *choice of the best* in the action of the Supreme Being. I want to speak about it here only briefly, to serve as a corrective to the exaggerated *judgment of Momus*.⁵³ The reader will observe, in a tangible way, what I said in the first volume, that such-and-such a thought, such-and-such a piece even, which might make me appear more than suspect when considered separately, changes in nature entirely when considered in the company of all my ideas.⁵⁴

This profane mocker of optimism is perhaps its most zealous partisan, provided that the system is considered properly and that nothing therein gets confused, which, indeed, is very rare, not to mention unprecedented. I do not know anyone who does not go too far by extending the idea of optimism from God's action to the perfection

of the world, as though the world, or this collection of an infinity of beings that modify themselves and each other as best they can, was, in all its modifications, the result of God's action alone. There is no one, then, who does not completely confuse these two propositions:

*God essentially chooses the best among all the possibles.
The world is the best of all possible worlds.*

Or else they are distinguished at most only as a very legitimate conclusion and its immediate premise.⁵⁵ In my opinion, however, these two propositions are so different and so far from being connected or *related* in any way that I take the second to be of the highest degree of falsity, and the opinion which maintains it for the most complete philosophical delirium. It's the false Minerva, object of Momus' taunts.⁵⁶ The other I take as a truth so obvious, and at the same time so necessary and so sacred, that to form the slightest doubt about it is, it seems to me, the same as renouncing the idea of God. Although this is not the place to enter in this matter, a little elaboration will not be inappropriate.

The world is the best of all possible worlds: that is to say that the sequence of all past, present and future events is the one which contained the least evil and the most good possible, both physical and moral.

Let's restrict ourselves to the latter, which is much more important.

Is it to say, then, that if a single one of the depraved men who from the beginning of the world have not followed the light of reason, nor listened to the reproaches of their conscience, had come to change his conduct, then the world would have been of lesser worth? That is, that if all those to whom we preach to convert or will preach to convert, and who will not do anything about it, came to do so, the world would lose much thereby?

Let someone come out with as many platitudes as he likes: I will not give up the view that infinite wisdom would be mocking us. If we do not obey it when it urges us to conform to its laws by the voice of conscience or by that of its ministers, one of two things is true: either that the thing is not possible in any world, or that this improvement of all as we are would spoil and corrupt this excellent world in which it has placed us. And what shall we say about the justice that punishes us? Of the goodness, of the infinite goodness, which calmly sees us punished for not having done what is not possible in any world, or what is not possible in the best? For not having done what would change the best to the point of it no longer being the best? On the contrary, for having done what is essential to the best? For having done what makes it the best?

It is therefore an egregious falsehood to claim that this world is the best possible, or even, in milder and more modest terms, the least bad. The smallest good action that we can perform but don't, would make it better. The most trivial crime, the slightest error into which we could avoid falling but into which we do fall, makes it worse. And to make it worse, or not to contribute to making it better, as we are able to do, is what makes us worthy of punishment.

Let's look at the other proposition.

God essentially chooses the best among all the possibles: that is, the being that is essentially all-good, all-wise, and all-powerful, essentially chooses, in everything it does, the greatest good, both morally and physically; it loves this greatest good as essentially as it knows it, and no foreign force is capable of diverting it therefrom.

That is to say that the being which, inasmuch as it is essentially all-good, essentially loves the greatest good known to it, and inasmuch as it is essentially all-wise, essentially knows the greatest good it is possible to realize, and which, moreover, inasmuch as it is essentially all-powerful, is essentially master of realizing that greatest good, that best, which is known to it and which it loves essentially. That is to say, then, that this being, infinitely exempt both from error and from constraint, will not scorn what it loves nor disregard what it knows.

That is to say, once more, that its complaisance, its choice, its action, will not ungenerously stop at a degree inferior to this one.

Thus, it is very false (despite what unquestionably the majority of theologians and philosophers dares to maintain), it is a falsehood beyond all expression, that the action of divine beneficence can stop, and actually be stopped, with complaisance and by choice, in everything it has done, at a degree infinitely inferior to the supreme degree of excellence; consequently, at a puny and miserable degree in comparison with an infinity of other degrees it sees as possible.

And it is also very false that such a goodness would deserve gratitude, unless it is for not having done worse.

For myself, although on a few occasions in my life I had the misfortune to seriously doubt the existence of a God because of cruel prejudices which grew in my mind at the time and eclipsed the purest light of day,⁵⁷ I have never had the misfortune to doubt for a single moment that if there does exist a God – a being endowed with omnipotence and which is as essentially good as intelligent – then this being is bound to love, choose, and do the best as essentially as he knows it. But how to reconcile the necessary, indispensable truth of this proposition, *God essentially chooses the best*, with the manifest falseness of this one, *this world is the best that was possible?*... I do not see that anyone has even had the opportunity of thinking of attempting it.

Without exception, all those who have felt the falsity of the assertion of the *best world*, have disregarded the truth and necessity of the *choice of the best* in God as far as to say openly, confirmed by the facts, according to what they claim, that the infinitely good being is, by its nature, so far from being determined to choose the best, whether in duration, number, extent, perfection or anything one likes, that in each of its works it has stayed infinitely below what it could do, and nonetheless justifiably takes pleasure in them.

On the other hand, all those who have felt how much the *choice of the best* is essential to the best being, have made the utmost efforts to offset the strange absurdity of establishing this world as the *best world*: and confirmed by the facts, according to what they likewise claim, they have argued, not that moral or physical evil is absolutely necessary in itself, but that it is necessary in the best world, so that if God made a world in which there were

no evils, as they admit he could (a world composed, for example, of as many Cherubim, holy and happy for eternity, as there are beings of every kind in this one), then that world would be, albeit without comparison, less perfect than this one.

Such are the monstrous opinions that have divided philosophy until today. Between these extremes there is no middle point, or one deemed worthy to recognize. *Quemvis media erue turba* [Pick any one you like from a crowd].⁵⁸ Call, summon whoever you like, from the crowd of those who profess to believe in the existence of a very wise and very good God. You will not find anyone who, disposed to one or other of these two sides injurious to the God he professes, does not nobly stifle its extravagance. Each sees the dreadful deformity of the opinion contrary to his own. He sees it like a lynx, and closes his eyes to the deformity of the one he embraces. One, however, is hardly better than the other... And we are astonished that impiety holds the upper hand from one day to the next, in spite of so many writings issued against it! I am not astonished to see it derive more benefit from this scandalous ebb and flow of contradictory opinions on a subject said to be very clear and very luminous.

I find the source of these pernicious opinions, against which we cannot speak out strongly enough, in the influence of a false theology, which has placed cruel obstacles to philosophers' thoughts. This theology has generally been confused with religion. Those who shook off the yoke of one, also shaking off the yoke of the other and hastening into Pyrrhonism, have not taken the trouble to make use of the freedom they gained to release themselves from fundamental "truths." All the others (without excluding those who are accused of being, or who pride themselves on being, the most free in their manner of thinking) have with the foundation of religion preserved a thousand theological prejudices; irreconcilable ideas, which had to be reconciled as best they could: an overly universal agent God; a power that acts on nothing as on something, and consequently independent of means; a power from then on responsible for all the good that is not done; a chimerical independence; freedom, immutability, and knowledge taken in very suspicious ways to extend beyond what is possible: on the other hand, goodness restrained infinitely below what is possible; an almost nominal goodness; I dare say, even in the very system of the partisans of optimism, and in the mouths of those who most exaggerate the *best*, the *choice of the best*, essential to the action of God.

It is from this frightful labyrinth that I have made every effort to distance myself. I will subsequently give an exact account of the success to my readers, to whom it is sufficient to affirm in general, as a result, a God who is the author and creator of all good, stranger to all evil, and worthy of every last bit of our confidence and love. Without deciding against respectable articles, except where I suspect error, I will content myself with first proposing to judicious minds, which are not overburdened with prejudices, to examine with me the advantages and disadvantages, if any, of this idea of God:

An infinitely good, wise and powerful cause, to whom we are indebted, not absolutely for our being, a dangerous gift, but for our well-being, a real favour. A cause, about whom we have

nothing to complain for making us pass (without our say so) from the tranquil state of non-being, where we ask for nothing and where we have no need for anything, to the frightful risks of being, either in this life or in another: but which, from the frightful risks of being in which the nature of things plunges us, leads us, as fast as possible, to a sure state of felicity, by creating us, literally, by a exquisite creation; that is to say, by making us pass from misery to happiness, and from imperfection to perfection (which is incomparably more than from non-being to being).

O God, worthy indeed of every last bit of our confidence and love!

Nothing has contributed more to convince me of the need to open new paths, or to reopen old, neglected, long-lost paths, than the question proposed by the Academy on optimism. I do not speak of the serious application, of which the examination of this multitude of pieces submitted to us made me a duty; I mean of the character and the very opposition of the pieces. It cannot be denied that there were many estimable by their subtlety or by the depth of research, and the winning one was like this.⁵⁹ But good God! In all of them, what opinions! In all of them, towards what extremities are we carried, determinedly, without looking behind us! Not the slightest attempt; not the slightest attempt at a mean between the opposing sides. Whichever side is chosen is endorsed entirely and with no turning back.

I had suspected as much. It suited no one, least of all me, to claim as guide to those who entered this fray. However, I could try to inspire views, especially by doing it in such an indirect manner that no one spotted my intention. To this end I hastened to produce my *Thoughts on Freedom*,⁶⁰ many of my *Thoughts on Man*,⁶¹ and my *Treatise on Chance under the Rule of Providence*,⁶² which even appeared in time, at the end of 1754.⁶³ There, without making an express mention of the subject of optimism, as proposed by the Academy, I nonetheless present with some ingenuity all the light and all the shadows necessary to bring out the idea I wanted to see developed. These essays were not unknown to the authors of some of the pieces we received, but compliments, and critiques as fruitless as the compliments, are all I have drawn from them. The object I most cared about was not apparent. In vain is this object encountered in thirty passages, under various guises, and always underneath more prominent features. It has not occurred to anyone to bring these features together, nor to honour with any discussion this doctrine sown in so many passages:

God is as essentially all that he is as the triangle is angular, the circle is round, and two and two are four. God is as essentially good as intelligent. God loves and wills a greater good as essentially as he knows this greater good, and he knows it essentially, indispensably, necessarily, logically, and metaphysically. What God wills, what God does, is therefore essentially, indispensably, necessarily, logically, and metaphysically the best. But God does not do, God does not will, everything that is done and willed in the world. He does not do what others do; he does not will what others will; nor does he make—that is to say, he does not carry out—the wills of others; he does not *carry out* a will of theirs, at least a *bad will*: that surpasses the sphere of possibilities. God wills all to be good, holy, and rational as is possible; only the essences of things are the limits of his good-will, as well as of his power. If God's work is the best possible, is this

world therefore the best possible? We must draw a distinction. It is so in all that concerns the influence of God's action. It is very far from being so in what results from the free actions of other beings. Let a being able to modify itself in a praiseworthy way modify itself in a criminal way; let a multitude, more or less great, of such beings do the same; the scene of the world is very different: its perfection and its imperfection change. This is not the fault of the very good and the very holy. He does not do the actions of others; it would be contradictory for him to do them. He does not modify that which modifies itself; it would be contradictory for him to modify it. He does not ordain evil or the lesser good, which is an evil. He does not incline or determine anything whatsoever. He does not in any way predestine. He does not decree anything except to reward as a king and punish as a father, as the situation requires. He does not permit evil, except in a very improper sense of the word *permit*, which would mean only not to prevent what the essences of things, in a very literal sense, do not permit one to prevent. He does not in any way influence the disorders that really are disorders, the evils that really are evils, which disturb and corrupt the mass; but he turns these evils, these disorders, which are not in any way in his power to suppress, to the greatest advantage of all beings. Impartial benefactor of all the beings there are, of each according to its nature from which he turns to the best account possible; source of all the good there is and will ever be, in a world infinite in extent and duration, he maintains, at each moment in this world, the best disposition that the essential freedom of beings, their malice, their wickedness, their imperfection, allows in each moment. At each moment his infinite wisdom, animated by boundless affection, intervenes with all the weight of his power and all the efficacy of his grace, to increase goods, reduce evils, cure, put right, relieve, and heal; to right wrongs, to heal the wounds that blind or wicked beings constantly cause by mutual blows. If all is not better; if all is not holy and happy (confirmed by the facts, it is my turn to say this openly) it is because the thing is not yet possible: it is because it is possible only by development and by degrees and that it is a matter of leading beings to make themselves such rather than to make them such, which is absurd. If it were only a matter of willing them to be such for them to be all *holy, happy, identified with God himself*, infinite goodness would not hesitate, would not defer for a moment. Infinite goodness would hate a wisdom that would persuade her *either that there is no best*, although it was a possible course of action, *or that it must not do this best*, although the only cost to it is to will it: and even more would infinite goodness hate a superb independence which would be wounded by such a choice.

This is not the twentieth part of the features of this nature I have sown in my essays, and this summary certainly removes them far from the fire and energy they have in the very passages where the outpouring of my heart has dictated them to me. People will conclude as much when they subsequently encounter them again; many will not delay doing so. It seemed to me that in a country in which these matters have been discussed more than elsewhere, and where one must keenly feel the need for new openings, the slightest sparks ought to have seized the attention of the philosophers. The conjuncture of the prize, the number of competitors, the illustrious Academy which proposed the question; all this enhanced the hope I had conceived.

What took me by surprise was that, out of this multitude of pieces, there were none in which anyone wanted to acknowledge a middle point between these positions: *the best world, and so much the best that one more good action or one less crime, one more happy person or one*

less unfortunate one, would have made it another world; possible for sure, but unworthy of supreme wisdom; this world, perverse and miserable... always good enough, in the eyes of a being who could put even more evils in it, and fewer goods, without anyone being entitled to complain; a being, whose sovereign independence owes nothing to puny beings. Everything boils down to this. And what is alleged in favour of the triumph of these consoling doctrines? Facts, first of all: everyone pulls them to himself as best he can. He is only too sure by the fact that the world is as it is. But is it such because the infinite goodness does not *see* the better, or because it does not *will* the better, or for some other reason? The facts say nothing about that.

People then throw themselves into a parade of the most hackneyed platitudes: on the one hand, about God's *wisdom*, and on the other, about his *independence*.

Wisdom! "Which really has insights we do not, from which it judges that all the beings of this world made holy and happy, as it could make them, immersed in the bosom of God, praising, blessing, cherishing God for eternity, would make a world less perfect than this one, and hence very unworthy of its choice."⁶⁴ Ah! I would have difficulty believing it if I heard it from the very mouth of the Most High, because I would always doubt whether it would be him who spoke. How can I believe it from the mouths of men? No, never, even if it was ten thousand Popes and ten thousand Leibnizes who affirmed it! "An error," it is said, "an error to imagine that it would be better for all to be *harmony* in the physical world and for all to be *virtue* in the moral world. An error to pretend that the *felicity* and *sanctity* of creatures are the main goals of divine wisdom. No, it is the *simplicity of means*, it is the *observation of general laws* that it has for its principal goal."⁶⁵ As few *exceptions* as possible; the least *miraculous intervention* is what charms divine wisdom." Hey, who is thinking of taking away this charm? Who is asking for a miracle other than the unique miracle of creation, already supposed? The wish is only (if the miracle is real) that, without cost, difficulty, or effort, it would have taken a better course for us. With regard to God, then, was it further from the non-existence of beings to their perfectly happy existence than from their non-existence to any existence whatsoever? Was it more difficult for him to say *let everything be holy and happy*, than to say *let everything exist*? "General laws are needed, and the fewest possible exceptions to these laws." Without a doubt. So I want only a good general law, *all holy and happy*, and no exceptions, not the slightest. "The greatest simplicity of means is needed." Oh, nothing simpler than to will, for which one only has to will. One act of will in God is no more complicated than another. The act of creation is not subject to any means, the act of creation of a world where everything is only virtue and harmony is no more subject to means than the act of creation of a world full of crimes and disorders. If the idea of one is more complicated than the idea of the other, it is the concern of intelligence, which, moreover, of two worlds to chose from, embraces one neither more nor less than the other; but the will does not need more effort, and no more action is required in one case than in the other. Or, do we pretend that it is in the very beings that make up the world that there must be

the least action? If it is the least action relative to such-and-such an effect, who would dispute you on that? But let the effect in question, the effect to be produced, therefore be to make all holy, all happy. As long as one is assured or will admit that the thing is possible, and possible for the simple will of God, I declare that I do not change anything. If it is in the least action that lies the sublime, absolutely speaking, then keep all beings in complete inactivity; plunge them into a lethargic sleep; moreover, let there be only a very small number of them brought into existence; even better, do not do it at all.

This is what the profound Leibnizian school neither saw nor wished to see, though I had placed it in front of its eyes to the point of exciting its bad humour. Now let's pass to the opposite extreme.

Independence! The *sovereign independence* of God! Another matter for edifying declamations, carefully collected by the other half of our competitors. That God is self-sufficient is first of all taken as a principle. So divine perfection finds all its fulfilment in God. So there is no perfection in God which has its fulfilment outside of him, not even goodness. But, it is objected, goodness is a propensity to do good. So God's essential goodness essentially assumes outside of God the existence of objects to which God can do good. I would add: therefore the infinite goodness of God, the infinite propensity to do good—and what good? an infinite good; to whom? to an infinity of beings—essentially supposes an infinity of real and existing beings outside of God. “This is a mistake,” it is said. “God's goodness is a completely different goodness from that. It is a goodness that has its *complete fulfilment* without doing the slightest good to anyone. It supposes the *possibility* of doing good to real beings, but it does not need these beings *existing* to be satisfied. They are present to the divine intellect from all eternity, and that is enough; their existence would do nothing more. Thus the existence of beings is merely *indifferent to God*, considered according to all his perfections. God wills everything that is good and perfect. Yes. But this is not to say that he wills it to exist. What an idea to imagine that he wills it! And why! It is of the utmost indifference to him whether there is more or less reality outside of him or whether there is any at all.”⁶⁶ *Reality*: come, have courage! Instead of this dry term of ontology, say *holiness, felicity*. It goes straight to the heart; what's the good of staying only in the mind? Let's articulate. “It is of the utmost *indifference* to God whether there is more or less holiness and felicity outside of him or whether there is any at all.” Isn't that what you mean? At least that's what's at issue. Man could have both more realities and other realities: let us say, man could be holy and happy forever, if it had pleased God, for his capacity in this respect, you admit, is infinite. “However,” you add, “although it did not please God to will it” (and that not because things would have been less perfect in this way, but because he did not want it, because it did not please him; do we need other reasons?), “we owe him no less sincere thanks for the gifts we have received from him with *so much liberality*. An infinitely good and infinitely powerful benefactor *seriously* wills the good of all his subjects...” Sacred truths, which are no longer only insupportable jargon, as soon as they are connected to such

doctrines! The infinite power that does only infinitely little for me – what does that matter to me? The infinite goodness that is indifferent towards everything which concerns me – what does that matter to me? “*Liberality!*” A strange beneficence, which is consummated in the contemplation of an infinite good it can do to me and does not do to me! “It wants, oh so solemnly, the good of all its subjects.” How do I know that, when it does so little compared to what it could do? When every dispensation on its part is *indifferent, arbitrary*, literally fortuitous, having no motives, either in it or outside of it? A touching point of view, very suitable for exciting in prayer the transports of our love!

Yet such is the doctrine, among others, of the piece the Academy crowned, to be sure without claiming to crown the doctrine itself; a distinction which is always supposed and of which it seems it ought to be unnecessary to point out. Thus, I confess, however revolted I am by this doctrine, I have nonetheless, following the light of my conscience, declared myself in favour of a piece which maintains it – shall I say it? – in a circumstance where the equality of voices, between this piece and another one completely the opposite, gave to my weak vote an unexpected preponderance. It is because I believe that, in such occasions, it is neither the partisan spirit nor the attachment to our opinions, nor even entirely the nature of the opinions, which is entitled to persuade us, but the merit of the treatment of the subjects. Although a partisan of optimism, I was not upset to see it overcome in this meeting, even less since I would have difficulty in determining which of the two ways I felt most remote from, the one that was attacked or the one that was defended. Ultimately, perhaps monstrous opinions grafted onto a truth shock even more than when they are in their legitimate relationship with error.

This is more than enough to make it clear how much the question of *optimism*, or the *choice of the best*, remains shrouded in darkness, and what powerful prejudices are opposed to what is agreed on this subject; that is to say, how far men are from understanding themselves when they profess *that there is a God, an infinite goodness, an infinite wisdom, etc.* I put off to the following pieces a few particular reflections which ought to have found a place at the end of this one.⁶⁷

Notes

¹ [André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval], *L'esprit de Fontenelle ou recueil de pensées tirées de ses ouvrages* (The Hague: Pierre Gosse, 1744).

² André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *Memoires d'André Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, Professeur en Mathematiques et Belles-Lettres*. The Hague: n.p., 1749.

³ André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *Panagiana panurgica, ou le faux evangeliste* (The Hague: Jean Neaulme, 1750). The title alludes to Tousseint's oft-used pseudonym, Panage, although *Les moeurs* was published anonymously.

⁴ [François Vincent Toussaint], *Les moeurs* (n.p.: n.p., 1748).

⁵ André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *La monogamie, ou l'unité dans le mariage; ouvrage dans le quel on entend d'établir, contre le préjugé commun, l'exacte & parfaite conformité des trois loix, de la nature, de Moïse, & de Jesus-Christ, sur ce sujet*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Pierre van Cleef, 1751-2).

⁶ See André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques; ou protestations et declarations sur les principaux objets des connoissances humaines*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Joachim Pauli, 1757), I: 239-40.

⁷ See Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, I: 275.

⁸ See Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, I: 18-32.

⁹ See Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, I: 164-236, and II: 243-268. An English translation of the latter can be found in André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *The Philosophical Writings of Prémontval*, ed. and trans. Lloyd Strickland (Lanham: Lexington, 2018), 1-10.

¹⁰ The proof is to be found in Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, "Les loix du Mouvement & du repos, déduites d'un Principe Metaphysique," in *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles-lettres. Année MDCCXLVI* (Berlin: Ambroise Haude, 1748), 267-294, and later in Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis, *Essai de cosmologie* (n.p.: n.p., 1751). An English translation of the latter can be found in *Proofs of God in Early Modern Europe*, ed. and trans. Lloyd Strickland (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018), 221-246.

¹¹ See André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *Pensées sur la Liberté, tirées d'un ouvrage qui a pour titre: protestations et déclarations philosophiques sur les principaux objets des connoissances humaines* (Berlin and Potsdam: Chrétien Frédéric Voss, 1754), and André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, "Remarque sur cette définition de M. Wolf du mot *aliquid*; *aliquid est cui aliqua notio respondent*. §54. de l'Ontologie. p. 41," in *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Sciences et des Belles-Lettres de Berlin MDCCCLIV* (Berlin: Haude and Spener, 1756), 440-443. English translations: Prémontval, *The Philosophical Writings of Prémontval*, 11-56 and 145-148.

¹² See Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, II: 269-306. English translation: Prémontval, *The Philosophical Writings of Prémontval*, 131-144.

¹³ As it happens, the reason for Prémontval's spurt of book publishing, namely his frustration early in 1754 at the Academy overlooking his work, evaporated soon after, as several of his memoirs from 1754, 1755, 1757, and 1758 were selected for publication in the Academy's proceedings for those years.

¹⁴ See Johann Gottlieb Buhle, *Literarischer Briefwechsel von Johann David Michaelis*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1794), I: 96.

¹⁵ Prémontval, *Pensées sur la Liberté*.

¹⁶ André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *Le Diogene de d'Alembert; ou Diogene décent: pensées libres sur l'homme & sur les principaux objets des connoissances de l'homme* (Berlin: n.p., 1754).

¹⁷ André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *De Dieu et de la Religion: Suite du Diogene décent* (Frankfurt: n.p., 1754).

¹⁸ The two books were reissued together a year later under the title of *Le Diogene de d'Alembert; ou Diogene décent*. An English translation of selections from this work can be found in Prémontval, *The Philosophical Writings of Prémontval*, 63-73.

¹⁹ André-Pierre Leguay de Prémontval, *Du hazard sous l'empire de la providence* (Berlin: J. C. Kluter, 1755). English translation: Prémontval, *The Philosophical Writings of Prémontval*, 75-129.

²⁰ See Buhle, *Literarischer Briefwechsel*, I: 96.

²¹ See Buhle, *Literarischer Briefwechsel*, I: 142-143.

²² The first volume was published in March 1757, the second in June. See Buhle, *Literarischer Briefwechsel*, I, 142-143. The two volumes were reprinted in 1761.

²³ Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*.

²⁴ Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, I: xxvi.

²⁵ See [Anon.], *Index librorum prohibitorum juxta exemplar romanum jussu sanctissimi domini nostri* (Mechelen: P. J. Hanicq, 1838), 287-288.

²⁶ See the registers held by the Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften under the shelfmarks I IV 31/06 – I IV 31/12.

²⁷ Prémontval even proposed the question for the 1759 prize essay, a question concerning the reciprocal influence of language and opinion. For further details, see Avi Lifschitz, *Language & Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁸ From the register for 7 June 1753 held by the Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften under the shelfmark I IV 31/06, Bl. 48.

²⁹ Johann Christoph Gottsched, *De optimismi macula diserte nuper Alexandro Popio anglo, tacite autem G. G. Leibnitio, perperam licet, inusta* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1753).

³⁰ [Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn], *Pope—ein Metaphysiker!* (Danzig: Johann Christian Schuster, 1755).

³¹ See Cornelia Buschmann, "Die Philosophischen Preisfragen und Preisschriften der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften im 18. Jahrhundert." In *Aufklärung in Berlin*, ed. by Wolfgang Förster, 165-228 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989), 199.

³² Namely [Martin Künzli], "Discours sur cette question, tout est-il bien? proposée par l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres de Ber-

lin, pour le prix de l'année 1755." In *Dissertation qui a remporté le prix proposé par l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres de Prusse, sur l'optimisme, avec les pieces qui ont concouru*, 1-31 (Berlin: Haude and Spener, 1755).

³³ See Eduard Winter, *Die Registres der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften 1746-1766* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1957), 58.

³⁴ Adolph Friedrich Reinhard, *Le système de Mr Pope sur la perfection du monde, comparé à celui de Mr de Leibnitz, avec un examen de l'optimisme* (Berlin: Haude and Spener, 1755), 29.

³⁵ Reinhard, *Le système de Mr Pope sur la perfection du monde*, 38.

³⁶ Reinhard, *Le système de Mr Pope sur la perfection du monde*, 41.

³⁷ Formey, "Dissertation qui a remporté le prix proposé par l'Académie Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres de Prusse, sur l'optimisme, avec les pieces qui ont concouru," *Nouvelle bibliothèque germanique* 18 (1756), 22-32, especially 29-32.

³⁸ Immanuel Kant, "An attempt at some reflections on optimism by M. Immanuel Kant, also containing an announcement of his lecture for the coming semester 7 October 1759," in Immanuel Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, eds. and trans. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 67-76.

³⁹ "Know, then, that with the votes equal between your piece and another, I – as much a supporter of optimism as I am – twice tipped the scales on your side" (Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, II: 69). The other piece Prémontval refers to here is likely the pro-optimism essay, [Künzli], "Discours sur cette question." Prémontval's claim to be a supporter of optimism is not straightforward, as we shall see.

⁴⁰ Prémontval, *Vues philosophiques*, II: 67-74 and 75-136. Both pieces were subsequently republished in German translation along with a number of other pieces prompted by Reinhard's winning essay; see Christian Ziegler, *Sammlung der Streitschriften über die Lehre von der besten Welt, und verschiedene damit verknüpfte wichtige Wahrheiten, welche zwischen dem Verfasser der im Jahr 1755. von der Akademie zu Berlin gekrönten Schrift vom Optimismo, und einigen berühmten Gelehrten gewechselt worden* (Rostock and Wismar: Berger and Boedner, 1759).

⁴¹ See Francis MacDonald Cornford, trans., *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 33 (*Timaeus* 29E-30A); Timaeus of Locri, *On the Nature of the World and the Soul*, trans. Thomas H. Tobin (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 37-39.

⁴² Also affirmed in other works, such as *Pensées sur la Liberté*, 38-49; *Du hazard sous l'empire de la providence*, 45-47.

⁴³ G. W. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1985), 188, §118.

⁴⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 260, §211.

⁴⁵ See Reinhard, *Le système de Mr Pope sur la perfection du monde*, 36.

⁴⁶ The same argument can be found in Prémontval, *Le Diogene de d'Alembert; ou Diogene décent: pensées libres sur l'homme & sur les principaux objets des connoissances de l'homme* (Amsterdam: n.p., 1755, new ed.), 229.

⁴⁷ See for example Daniel A. Dombrowski, *A History of the Concept of God: A Process Approach* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), 56-57.

⁴⁸ See Prémontval, *Memoires*, 227.

⁴⁹ For example, one reviewer of Prémontval's *Vues Philosophiques* complained that "The Christianity the author professes is very different from the Christianity Jesus Christ established. His writings offer us only a mangled Christianity, less suited to feature in the School of Jesus Christ than in an Academy of philosophers; in wanting to ease our faith, he continually upsets it." [Anon.], "Vues Philosophiques ou Protestations & Déclarations sur les principaux objets des connoissances humaines, par Mr. de Prémontval," *Journal Encyclopedique, par une société de gens de lettres. Pour le 15. Mai 1757. Tome IV. Première partie* (Liege: Everard Kints, 1757), 28-40, at 36-37.

⁵⁰ For which see Dombrowski, *A History of the Concept of God: A Process Approach*. Unfortunately, Dombrowski does not mention Prémontval at all in his history of the process or neoclassical conception of God, despite the obvious overlap in views. Prémontval believed that God existed in time and that his knowledge did not extend to future events, which were genuinely undetermined and hence unknowable in advance. He also insisted that God is the creator only of the world's *order* rather than the world *per se*, and that God is restricted to acting on the world by influence rather than by fiat. He believed that God undergoes change. Moreover, he also gestured at a dipolar notion of God. All of these views would later characterize the process or neoclassical conception of God.

⁵¹ I would like to thank Daniel J. Cook for his helpful comments on a previous draft of this paper.

⁵² From Prémontval, *Vues philosophiques* II, 32-66.

⁵³ Prémontval alludes here to his short story, “The false Minerva, or, the good judgement of Momus” in Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, II: 10-1810-18; English translation: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/minerva.htm>. In this story, following complaints from the inhabitants of the Earth about the evils they endure, Minerva explains to the gods that in fact all was good [tout étoit bien], and that for all to be good there had to be innumerable evils of every kind. The gods accept her argument without understanding it, concluding that if the people of Earth were not content living in the so-called best possible world, despite its great quantity of evils, they should be, a view which elicits derisive laughter from the character Momus. Momus was the Greek god of satire, mockery, blame, and criticism, famed for finding fault with everything. In presenting Momus as a critic of optimism, Prémontval is probably thinking of fable 518 of Aesop: “The story goes that Zeus, Poseidon and Athena were arguing about who could make something truly good. Zeus made the most excellent of all animals, man, while Athena made a house for people to live in, and, when it was his turn, Poseidon made a bull. Momus was selected to judge the competition, for he was still living among the gods at that time. Given that Momus was inclined to dislike them all, he immediately started to criticize the bull for not having eyes under his horns to let him take aim when he gored something; he criticized man for not having been given a window into his heart so that his neighbour could see what he was planning; and he criticized the house because it had not been made with iron wheels at its base, which would have made it possible for the owners of the house to move it from place to place when they went travelling.” *Aesop’s Fables*, trans. Laura Gibbs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 239.

⁵⁴ See Prémontval, *Vues Philosophiques*, I: 271-272.

⁵⁵ That is, Prémontval supposes that some people think it legitimate to conclude that this is the best of all possible worlds from the premise that God chooses the best among all possibles.

⁵⁶ See note 53.

⁵⁷ See Prémontval, *Memoires*, 227.

⁵⁸ From Horace, *Satires* 1.4.25.

⁵⁹ That is, Reinhard’s *Le système de Mr Pope*.

⁶⁰ Prémontval, *Pensées sur la Liberté*.

⁶¹ Prémontval, *Le Diogene de d’Alembert*.

⁶² Prémontval, *Du hazard sous l’empire de la providence*.

⁶³ Prémontval’s note: “The title-page says 1755, but be aware that books which appear towards the end of a year bear the date of the next one. If need be, the literary gazettes of November and December 1754 would prove that this one had appeared. And, in fact, it was spoken about in one of the pieces sent to the Academy, as was the *Pensées sur la Liberté*, which was refuted by taking my thoughts in a very different spirit from what I intended.” The claim that *Du hazard sous l’empire de la providence* appeared in 1754 looks untrue. In a letter to a friend written in February 1755, Prémontval claimed that the book was still “15 days or 3 weeks” away from being printed. See Prémontval to Francois Thomas Marie de Baculard d’Arnauld, February 21, 1755, unpublished letter held by the Berlin Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Darmstädter Collection.

⁶⁴ Prémontval is here articulating what optimists would say.

⁶⁵ Prémontval likely has Leibniz in mind here. In his *Theodicy*, Leibniz had claimed that “God can follow a simple, productive, regular plan; but I do not believe that the best and the most regular is always opportune for all creatures simultaneously.” Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 260, §211.

⁶⁶ Prémontval is now articulating what anti-optimists would say. Although he likely has Reinhard in mind here, similar claims were also sometimes made by optimists. For example, in a work in which he argued that ours is the best of all possible worlds, Christian Wolff also claimed that God is sufficient unto himself and so indifferent as to whether to create or not. See Christian Wolff, *Theologia naturalis, methodo scientifica pertractata. Pars prior, integrum systema complectens, qua existentia et attributa dei a posteriori demonstrantur* (Frankfurt and Leipzig: n.p., 1736), 401-402 (§430).

⁶⁷ These pieces are: “Lettre à M. Adolphe Frideric Reinhard, Auteur de la Piece couronnée par l’Academie en 1755” (*Vues Philosophiques* II, 67-74) and “Remarques sur la Piece couronnée par l’Academie en 1755” (*Vues Philosophiques* II, 75-136).