

**Leibniz's "On Generosity," With English Translation**  
by Donald Rutherford, University of California, San Diego

The essay "On Generosity"<sup>1</sup> holds a special place among Leibniz's ethical writings. In no other text does Leibniz give such prominence to the concept of generosity, or relate it to his central doctrine of justice as the charity of the wise. The circumstances of the piece's composition are uncertain. Watermark dating of the paper places it in the period 1686-1687(?). The Academy editors suggest a connection between it and a text by an unknown author, "Discours sur la générosité,"<sup>2</sup> a transcription of which is found among Leibniz's manuscripts. The paper on which this latter text is written is dated by watermark to the same period as "On Generosity," and the editors plausibly speculate that Leibniz's reading of it may have spurred the composition of his own essay on the topic.

As Leibniz uses it, "generosity" has a significance that goes beyond its modern meaning of liberality or kindness. Etymologically, the word derives from the Latin verb *genero*, to beget. The noun and adjectival forms, *generositas* and *generosus*, early on acquire the positive connotation of being well born or of superior stock (in the latter sense both words are applied to well-bred animals). Already in the classical period, however, the terms also acquire an extended meaning as signifying nobility of character, or noble-mindedness. It is in this sense that Seneca contrasts the external trappings of nobility with the true nobility that characterizes the person of virtue: "Who is well born [*generosus*]? He who is by nature well fitted for virtue.... A hall full of smoke-begrimed busts does not make the nobleman. No past life has been lived to lend us glory, and that which has existed before us is not ours; the soul alone renders us noble, and it may rise superior to fortune out of any earlier condition, no matter what that condition has been."<sup>3</sup> As Seneca describes him, the noble person values virtue, or rectitude, for its own sake and above all else. Consequently, he is secure against hardships of fortune that threaten external goods such as wealth or fame. For Seneca, such an individual is truly *generosus*, or well born; and for both Stoics and later Christians, it was natural to regard such individuals as approaching most closely their divine origin.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of generosity acquires a new life in the early seventeenth century, as part of a broader revival and adaptation of Stoic moral thought. At the same time, the concept assumes a theoretical importance that it did not have for the Stoics. This is best exemplified by Descartes, who in the third part of the *Passions of the Soul* identifies the virtue of *générosité* as "the key to all the other virtues and a general remedy for every disorder of the passions" (art. 161). Descartes pre-

serves the connection of generosity to “good birth” (ibid.), and like Seneca finds it represented in the character of individuals who esteem themselves in accordance with their “true value” (art. 161), which consists solely in a virtuous will (art. 154). Yet precisely because of their virtue, such individuals are also seen as displaying generosity in the modern sense: “they esteem nothing more highly than doing good to others and disregarding their own self-interest” (art. 156).<sup>5</sup> A similar development is observed in Spinoza’s employment of the concept in the *Ethics*. The mind of the virtuous person—the person guided by reason alone—exhibits *fortitudo* (“strength of character”), which in turn is distinguished as either *tenacitas* (“tenacity”) or *generositas* (“nobility”). The former Spinoza relates to “the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to preserve his being”; the latter, “the desire by which each one strives, solely from the dictate of reason, to aid other men and join them to him in friendship” (III P59S).<sup>6</sup> Thus, *generositas* is specifically the virtue by which an individual’s actions aim at another’s advantage [*utile*], as opposed to his own. For this reason, Spinoza identifies *generositas* as a species of love (IV P46).

Leibniz was familiar with both of these accounts, having composed notes on the works from which they are drawn approximately a decade before the composition of “On Generosity.”<sup>7</sup> Although there is no reason to think that Leibniz’s later treatment of the concept was significantly influenced by either Descartes or Spinoza, their views agree on two central points: (1) the generous, or noble, person values nothing more highly than virtue itself; (2) the actions of the generous person are aimed at promoting the interests or advantage of others, in preference to his own self-interest. On the second point, we can observe at least a partial divergence between this position and the conception of generosity defended in the anonymous “Discours sur la generosité.” In that text we find restated the Stoic thesis that, because the generous person “loves nothing so passionately as virtue, he treats nearly everything else as indifferent, which places him above fortune and gives him a constancy so great that nothing could disturb or weaken him” (A VI.4, 2747). At the same time, it is argued that generosity, as much as vanity or ambition, originates in “self-love [*amour-propre*], the mother of all our actions” (A VI.4, 2745).<sup>8</sup> The “predominant passion” of every human being is “to have a good opinion of himself and to form an advantageous idea of his merit” (A VI.4, 2748). The generous person is distinguished from the vain or ambitious by the fact that his good opinion of himself is based entirely on “qualities that he can call his own and which are praiseworthy in themselves” (A VI.4, 2745). Yet, according to the “Discours,” his generosity remains an extension of the natural self-love of human

*LEIBNIZ'S 'ON GENEROSITY'*

beings.

If the Academy editors are correct in their hypothesis that Leibniz was led to compose his own essay on generosity by his reading of the "Discours," we can conjecture that he did so with the aim of correcting its account of generosity. Leibniz begins by drawing the reader back to the original meaning of the word: to be generous is to be well born. But we are each well born to the extent that we recognize our divine origin and identify ourselves with the perfections we inherit from God. These perfections are the basis of our virtue, which Leibniz explains in terms of his fundamental notion of justice as "the charity of the wise." Thus, the person who displays generosity, who values virtue above all else, is also one whose character evinces a justice that most closely approaches God's. Not only does such an individual always aim to fulfill his duty, doing no wrong, but he actively strives to promote the well-being of others to the greatest extent possible. Hence, through his concept of justice, Leibniz is able to bridge the gap between the ancient conception of generosity as nobility and its modern understanding as liberality.

Given its comfortable fit with the rest of his ethical theory, it is perhaps curious that Leibniz did not return to the idea of generosity in later writings. The explanation for this may be simply that he had no need for the concept. Drawing on the resources of his philosophy, he demonstrated in "On Generosity" how the concept should be understood, but in doing so he also showed generosity to be a derivative concept that had no independent role to play within his theory.

## “On Generosity”

(Translation)

Generosity, in the proper sense of the word, is the virtue that elevates us to perform actions worthy of our kind, nature, descent, or origin, which is heavenly; for, as St. Paul says, following a Greek poet whom he himself cites, we are of the kind or race of God, who is the source of minds. It is in this sense also that it is fitting for all human beings to be generous and to act according to the nobility of human nature, so as not to degenerate or to lower oneself to the level of beasts. This has been very well expressed in these verses of Boethius, the Roman senator:

We are all well born, and of superior origin  
If we feel in ourselves our divine source.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, generosity, which ordinarily signifies the virtue of true nobility, is taken generally for the virtue by which we bring ourselves to do actions that are at once elevated and reasonable, for without the light of reason and justice, this elevation is only ambition and vanity.

It is necessary, therefore, that the truly generous person show by his actions that he possesses perfections and virtues that are difficult to practice and that are not encountered in common souls. He will have the courage of Pompey, who, embarking on a pressing affair at the risk of a shipwreck, said to those who wanted him to turn back, “It is necessary that I go, it is not necessary that I live.”<sup>10</sup> He will have the moderation of Alexander, who seeing within his grasp the wife of Darius, perhaps the most beautiful woman in Asia, subordinated his passion to his glory. As for justice, of which I shall speak shortly, he has a duty to display this above all in his actions.

The generous person must respect without exception certain maxims suited for regulating his conduct. *First*, he must avoid all that is base and all that he would not want known by everyone. *Second*, when he is in doubt as to what to do, he will opt for that course of action which appears to be the furthest from any hint of sin or injustice. And as much as he must be bold when his comfort and even his life are at risk, equally he must be cautious when there is a danger of committing a crime, and in this alone he must be timid. *Third*, he will be suspicious of all that is easiest and that the least man from the dregs of society, if he were in his place, would do as well as him. *Fourth*, he will be suspicious of all courses of action and all outcomes in which self-interest dominates, and he must act on the basis of a nobler principle. However, as false glory is often veiled by a mask that makes it resemble generosity, it is necessary to consider that every action that goes against justice, that is, against the public good, and in a word, all that is contrary to virtue, is not

*LEIBNIZ'S 'ON GENEROSITY'*

glorious; and that all actions that will be justly blamed and even punished if they do not succeed, and that chance alone can justify, are never glorious, whatever success they might have. On the contrary, every action that will be praised even if luck does not favor it, is worthy of the person who seeks true glory.

Indeed, one can judge that the good we receive from glory lies only in our mind, for whoever cares about glory must always himself hear something of his fame; from which we can conclude that glory pleases us because it causes us to make a favorable judgment of ourselves that increases our satisfaction, based on the testimony of others. But if we know that these people are mistaken, and the conscience with which we are burdened forces us to confess inwardly our crimes and our imperfections, what part could we take in this satisfaction, what comfort could we find in these vain appearances, while the inward bitterness that fills the mind is mixed with it? And it is for this reason that one has always valued more highly the approval of a few excellent men than that of a crowd of ignorant and vicious ones.

Above all, it is necessary to be wary of actions that appear glorious to corrupt men, but which are in fact detestable, on account of the evils they produce in the world, such as unjust and unnecessary wars, uprisings, and all that leads to murders, fires, and public destruction, for all these things can never be excused, except when they serve to avoid greater evils.

It remains, then, only to say something about justice, which is the soul of generosity. In the past this was the occupation of heroes, to punish the wicked and to protect innocence. And what is recognized as unjust will never pass as generous.

But the principle of justice is the good of society, or more precisely, the general good, for we are all part of the universal republic of which God is the monarch, and the great law established in this republic is to procure as much good as we can for the world. This is certain, supposing that there is a providence that governs all things, even though the underlying workings are still hidden from our eyes. It must therefore be taken as certain that the more good a man has done, or at least tried to do with all his power (for God, who knows intentions, takes a genuine volition for the effect itself), the more happy he will be; and if he has done or even wanted to do great evils, he will receive great punishments as a result.

Faith is not needed to know this great maxim; it is enough to have good sense, for since in a complete or perfect body, such as, for example, a plant or an animal, there is a marvelous structure that indicates that the author of nature has concerned himself with it and regulated it down to the least of its parts, by all the more reason, the greatest and most perfect of all bodies, which is the universe, and the most noble parts of the universe, which are souls, will not fail to be well ordered, even

*DONALD RUTHERFORD*

though this order may not yet be manifest to us as long as we can envision only a part of it. In the same way we see that the pieces or fragments of some broken crystals of rock or of some disassembled artificial or natural machine, considered apart from and outside of their whole, do not allow us to know the regular shape or design of the entire body.

Therefore, we are not born for ourselves but for the good of society, just as parts are for the whole, and we must consider ourselves as only instruments of God, albeit living and free instruments, capable of agreeing with him according to our choice. If we are deficient in this respect, we are like monstrosities and our vices are like diseases in nature, and without a doubt we will be punished for them, so that the order of things may be redressed, just as we see that diseases weaken and that monstrosities are more imperfect.

From this we can judge that the principles of generosity are the same as those of justice or piety, whereas self-interest and self-love, when it is badly regulated, are the principles of cowardice. For, as I said at the outset, generosity brings us close to the author of our kind or being, that is, God, as much as we are capable of imitating him. So we must act in conformity with the nature of God (who himself is the good of all creatures); we must follow his intention, which commands us to procure the common good, as much as it depends on us, since charity and justice consist only in this. We must respect the dignity of our nature, whose excellence consists in the perfection of the mind, or in the highest virtue. We must partake in the happiness of those around us, as in our own, seeking neither our comforts nor our interests in what is contrary to the common happiness; and finally, we must consider what the public wants from us and what we ourselves would want if we were to occupy the place of others, for this is like the voice of God and the mark of vocation.

But if we scorn these great reasons of the public good for which we are made by seeking our advantage, particularly at the risk even of public misery, we could not be generous, whatever profession we might make of pursuing glory alone in our actions, and we could not even be happy, whatever success our ventures might have, for the laws of the universe are inviolable, and we must take it as certain that there is no crime that will not be punished in proportion to the evils it has caused or which we must judge it could cause.<sup>11</sup>

LEIBNIZ'S 'ON GENEROSITY'

Donald Rutherford  
Department of Philosophy, 0119  
University of California, San Diego  
9500 Gilman Drive  
LaJolla, CA 92093-0119 USA  
drutherford@ucsd.edu

Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Sur la Générosité*, A VI.4C, N. 476. Cf. G VII 104-108.

<sup>2</sup> A VI.4C, N. 486.

<sup>3</sup> *Ep.* 44.5. Quoted from Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, tr. Richard M. Gummere, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), vol. 1, 289. Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 39.1, 71.19, 76.30; *De vita beata* 13.4, 20.2.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 120.21ff.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, tr. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), vol. 1, 384-8.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and tr. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), vol. 1, 529-30.

<sup>7</sup> On Descartes, see A VI.3, 643-4 (1676) and A VI.4, 1420 (*De affectibus*, 1679); on Spinoza, A VI.4, 1730, 1735 (1678?). A third source is Henry More's *Enchiridium Ethicum*, from which Leibniz quotes a Cartesian-inspired definition of *generositas* (A VI.3, 358; 1676).

<sup>8</sup> On the ethics of *amour-propre*, see Anthony Levi, *French Moralists: The Theory of the Passions, 1585-1649* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, III.6.

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, Pompey, 50, 2.

<sup>11</sup> My thanks to Sam Rickless for reviewing the translation and offering helpful suggestions for its improvement.