


Please cite the Published Version

Strickland, L  (2010) Leibniz's philosophy of purgatory. *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 84 (3). pp. 531-548. ISSN 1051-3558

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq201084335>

Publisher: Philosophy Documentation Center

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/344075/>

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Leibniz's philosophy of purgatory

Abstract. As a lifelong Lutheran who resisted numerous attempts by Catholic acquaintances to convert, one might reasonably expect Leibniz to have followed the orthodox Lutheran line on disputed doctrinal issues, and thus held amongst other things that the doctrine of purgatory was false. Yet there is strong evidence that Leibniz personally *accepted* the doctrine of purgatory. After examining this evidence, I determine how Leibniz sought to justify his endorsement of purgatory, and explain how his endorsement sits alongside his frequent rehearsal of familiar Protestant arguments against the doctrine. I then examine some of Leibniz's other theological and philosophical commitments, including those on the afterlife, in order to tentatively tease out further details of the form of purgatory that won his approval. In considering these issues, I aim to make clear the extent to which Leibniz's philosophical thinking underpins and shapes his theological beliefs.

I.

Very little is ever straightforward with Leibniz. As a lifelong Lutheran who resisted numerous attempts by Catholic acquaintances to convert,¹ one might reasonably

¹ See for example A I 6, 229; A II 2 (2nd ed.), 227. When citing Leibniz's works I use the following abbreviations: A = *Sämtliche schriften und briefe*, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften, multiple volumes in 8 series, cited by series (reihe) and volume (band) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923-). CP = *Confessio Philosophi*, trans. and ed. Robert Sleigh Jr. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). D = *G. G. Leibnitii Opera Omnia*, ed. L. Dutens, 6 volumes (Geneva, 1768). G = *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt, 7 volumes (Berlin:

expect him to have followed the orthodox Lutheran line on disputed doctrinal issues, and thus held amongst other things that the doctrine of purgatory was false.² Yet in a letter to one of his Catholic correspondents, Leibniz confides: “I personally hold that a certain temporal punishment after this life is rather reasonable and probable.”³ Lest it be thought that this is little more than a sop to the theological sensibilities of his

Weidmann, 1875-1890). Gr = *Textes inédits*, ed. Gaston Grua, 2 volumes with successive pagination (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948). H = *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1990). K = *Correspondenz von Leibniz mit Sophie Charlotte, Königin von Preußen*, ed. Onno Klopp (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1970). L = *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. and trans. Leroy E. Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1969, 2nd ed.). LBr = unpublished manuscript, held by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hanover, Germany. LDB = *The Leibniz-Des Bosses Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Brandon C. Look and Donald Rutherford (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). LH = unpublished manuscript, held by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hanover, Germany. P = *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent, 1973). SLT = *Shorter Leibniz Texts*, trans. and ed. Lloyd Strickland (London: Continuum, 2006).

When quoting from these sources, I cite the original language source first, followed by that of an English translation, where available. Where no English translation is available the translation is my own.

² For Luther’s denial of purgatory, see Martin Luther, “Ein Widerruf vom Fegefeuer,” in *Martin Luthers Werke*, 65 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1863-), XX (1893), pt. 2, 360ff. Leibniz was uncomfortable with the term “Lutheran”; see A I 7, 257.

³ A I 7, 325. The correspondent was Landgrave Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels.

correspondent, it should be noted that similar expressions of sympathy towards the doctrine of purgatory are found elsewhere in Leibniz's writings, for example in a letter to a Protestant correspondent and in a text written for his own personal use.⁴ Leibniz's countenance of purgatory, found as it is in only a handful of passages throughout his entire corpus, would at first glance seem to sit uneasily with the fact that in a much larger number of his writings he rehearses familiar Protestant arguments *against* the doctrine. How to resolve this apparent tension is only one of the puzzles for Leibniz scholars, however. Another is to determine how Leibniz—always keen to provide a rational justification for his theological beliefs—sought to justify his endorsement of purgatory. And lastly, there is the question of what form of purgatory won Leibniz's approval, and how it sits alongside his other theological and philosophical commitments. In this paper I shall address all three of these issues in turn, and in the process we shall see the extent to which Leibniz's philosophical thinking underpins and shapes his theological beliefs.

II

In Catholicism, purgatory has long been held to be the final stage of a person's sanctification, and is traditionally thought to involve punishment during the *status medius*, that is, the time between death and resurrection. Supporters of purgatory have typically offered a twofold defence of the doctrine. In the first place, purgatory is said to be established by tradition, being affirmed in the writings of the early Church fathers, in particular those of Augustine. Secondly, purgatory is established by the

⁴ A I 18, 390 (the correspondent in question was Johann Fabricius); unpublished manuscript, LH 1, 7, 5 Bl. 119r.

traditional practice of saying prayers for the souls of the dead.⁵ The argument here runs as follows: if the dead are helped by prayers, as the practice assumes, then it follows that they are not yet either saved or damned but in some intermediate state. The blessed, after all, would not need any assistance, while the damned would be beyond it. Consequently those who are helped by prayers must be currently subject to punishment that can be mitigated, which makes sense only if the doctrine of purgatory is true. Both of these proofs were as common in early modern times as in the centuries before and since.⁶ Indeed, some early modern defenses of purgatory consisted of little more than a string of quotations from or citations of the Church fathers, in an attempt to show that the doctrine was accepted in the early Church and therefore had the

⁵ Only the latter of the two proofs is mentioned by Paul J. Griffiths in a recent survey article on purgatory. However he does mention two further arguments in favor of purgatory—that the idea of an intermediate state is traditional in Christian thinking, and that there is need for a remedy to postbaptismal sin in order that it does not disbar most or all Christians from heaven—but as these arguments were not commonly used in early modern times, and were not discussed by Leibniz, I have not discussed them here. See Paul J. Griffiths, “Purgatory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. Jerry L. Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 427-445, at 430-433.

⁶ It is not uncommon to find the claim that purgatory also has a scriptural basis, in particular in passages such as I Corinthians 3.11-15 and 2 Maccabees 12.43-46. However the latter is generally rejected by Protestants on the ground that it is part of the Apocrypha and so not scripture, while the former attracts the complaint that it is ambiguous and so not an unequivocal endorsement of the doctrine of purgatory at all.

weight of tradition behind it.⁷ Other defenses stressed that the practice of saying prayers for the dead was “inseparable” from the doctrine of purgatory,⁸ or constituted “evident Proof” of it.⁹

Protestant efforts to undermine purgatory generally took the form of attacking the two aforementioned proofs.¹⁰ With regard to the doctrine’s affirmation in the writings of the early Church fathers, especially Augustine, the oft-made Protestant response was to deny that it was affirmed by the Church fathers, especially Augustine.¹¹ This was not a straightforward task, and detractors were often forced to concede that, in the words of William Wake, Augustine “does sometimes speak of a *Purgatory* after this Life.”¹² Yet this concession invariably came with this qualification: while Augustine

⁷ See for example Pierre Le Loyer, *Discours et histoires des spectres, visions et apparitions des esprits, anges, demons* (Paris, 1605), 595ff, and Thomas Ward, *Speculum ecclesiasticum* (London, 1687).

⁸ Louis Thomassin, *Traité dogmatique et historique des édits et des autres moïens spirituels et temporels dont on s’est servi pour maintenir l’unité de l’Église catholique, divisé en deux parties* (Paris, 1703), 24.

⁹ Thomas Worthington, *An introduction to the Catholick faith* (London, 1709), 127.

¹⁰ Protestants also commonly sought to discredit the doctrine of purgatory on account of its association with the (notoriously abused) practice of indulgences; John Hartcliffe, for instance, claimed that purgatory was “invented on purpose to encrease the treasury of the Church.” John Hartcliffe, *A Discourse against Purgatory* (London, 1685), 1.

¹¹ See for example, James Gordon, *A request to Roman Catholicks*, 5th ed. (London, 1687), 13.

¹² William Wake, *Two discourses of purgatory* (London, 1687), 5.

does speak of purgatory, he speaks of it “with so much doubt and uncertainty” that it could not have been an article of faith in the primitive church.¹³

In response to the proof from prayers for the dead, Protestant writers often sought to draw a sharp distinction between the doctrine of purgatory and the practice of saying prayers for the dead. According to Protestants, these prayers can be considered nothing more than expressions of hope,¹⁴ or actions which would be looked upon by God as “a pleasing Sacrifice.”¹⁵ Alternatively, they could be supposed to have the effect of inducing God to favor souls currently detained in an imperfect state of happiness, so that they would be elevated to perfect happiness sooner than would otherwise be the case.¹⁶ With these alternative explanations to hand, Protestants argued that it could not be the case that the practice of saying prayers for the dead implied or proved purgatory, as Catholic writers often supposed.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁵ Archibald Bower, *The history of the Popes, from the foundation of the See of Rome to the present time*, 7 vols. (London, 1759), IV, 139.

¹⁶ Ibid; also Thomas Bennett, *A confutation of Popery, in III. parts* (Cambridge, 1701), 271.

¹⁷ Other responses include the claim that, in the early Church, prayers were often said for those whose blessed state could not possibly be called into doubt, such as patriarchs, prophets and apostles, which suggests that such prayers were not thought to imply purgatory by the early Christians. See Lewis Atterbury, *An answer to a popish book, intituled, A true and modest account of the chief points in controversie, between the Roman catholicks and the protestants* (London, 1706), 211.

The same kind of responses to the two proofs of purgatory (namely the proof from tradition, and the proof from prayers for the dead) can be found scattered throughout Leibniz's corpus. Leibniz seems to have taken the first proof more seriously, judging from the lengthy papers he composed on it in 1677 and 1694. In the former, entitled "Consideration of the passages which are adduced in favor of purgatory," Leibniz analyzes various passages from a number of early Church fathers, including Basil, Theodoret, Tertullian and Cyprian. Unsurprisingly, a significant proportion of the piece is devoted to Augustine, and Leibniz's analysis takes in no less than five of the great Saint's works.¹⁸ Leibniz's choice of passages to scrutinize owes much to Bernhard Rebolledos' *Dissertatio apologetica de purgatorio* (1660),¹⁹ which undoubtedly contains one of the most sustained attempts to establish purgatory on the words of the Church Fathers.

Leibniz's analysis is preceded by a distinction between two notions of purgatory. First there is the notion commonly defended by Catholic authors, whereby purgatory is understood to be

the place or state of souls of believers in which, immediately after death, they suffer for some time the gravest punishments for their sins and are helped by the prayers and sacrifices of the living until divine justice is placated and they are admitted to beatitude even before resurrection.²⁰

¹⁸ These are *Enchiridion* chapters 67 and 109, *On Eight Questions to Dulcitus* 1 and 2, *Hypomnesticon contra Pelagianos et Coelestianos* VI.5., *City of God* 21.24 and 21.26, and *On care for the dead* 10-16.

¹⁹ Bernhard Rebolledos, *Dissertatio apologetica de purgatorio* (Cologne, 1660).

²⁰ A VI 4, 2126.

Although this goes beyond official Catholic teaching regarding purgatory, it does capture the notion as it has been traditionally understood, and consequently I shall term this the “traditional notion” of purgatory. The second notion of purgatory Leibniz terms the “purgatory of the resurrection” on the grounds that

this is said to apply to all men after the resurrection, although it will not be equally severe and long-lasting for everyone. And it is not [a purgatory] of the separated soul, but of the whole person after the reunion of body and soul.²¹

The differences between the two notions are thus clear. In the traditional notion, purgatory begins after a person’s death and continues until God is placated, and applies only to the person’s separated soul. In the “purgatory of the resurrection,” which Leibniz attributes to the Greek church, purgatory takes place at the time of the resurrection, and applies to body and soul together.

With the two notions laid out, Leibniz then proceeds to consider a range of passages from various Church Fathers, in each case attempting to determine if it unambiguously supports the traditional notion of purgatory or is instead interpretable as a reference to the purgatory of the resurrection. After a great deal of hermeneutical analysis, Leibniz determines (perhaps surprisingly) that many passages support the former, in particular those from Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine. This finding does, however, come with a caveat—even those Fathers who do unambiguously refer to the notion of purgatory “which flourishes now in the Roman Church,” do so cautiously;²²

²¹ A VI 4, 2126-7.

²² A VI 4, 2139.

for example, after quoting a lengthy passage from Augustine's *The City of God* (book 21 chapter 26), a favorite among supporters of purgatory, Leibniz opines that "it is evident that Augustine speaks hesitatingly."²³ This leads Leibniz to the conclusion that proving (the traditional notion of) purgatory by appealing to the Church Fathers is problematic:

It is surprising how they [the early fathers] proceed with uncertain steps. For often they are silent about purgatory when it seemed to be very much the time to speak about it. I infer from this that the matter at that time was not sufficiently received.²⁴

A later paper on the subject (1694), written for the Catholic Duchess Benedicta Henrietta, focuses entirely on Augustine's writings. Entitled "St. Augustine's opinion on purgatory," the paper begins as follows:

It is very certain that St. Augustine talked about purgatory as an uncertain thing. And after having read his passages attentively, one cannot doubt this unless one rejects his sincerity. And he wrote in that way when he was already old, and he never retracted it. He effectively leaned towards a kind of purgatory, and he believed it *probable* that those who are too attached to worldly things will suffer pain in the other life by the detachment from what they loved, before they attain perfect beatitude. But more than once he declares that this is only *probable*, and he speaks about it in a doubtful way, specifically using 'perhaps', and saying

²³ A VI 4, 2137.

²⁴ A VI 4, 2140.

that it will not seem ‘unbelievable’, just as if he said that it is not impossible.

Which clearly shows that he did not hold it to be an article of faith.²⁵

The remainder of the paper consists of a commentary on various passages from four of Augustine’s works,²⁶ with Leibniz insisting that in each case Augustine’s hesitant language demonstrates that the great Saint did not consider purgatory to be an article of faith. As I have noted, this conclusion was commonly advanced by Protestant authors of the time, many of whom reached it after engaging in a similar analysis and discussion of Augustine’s writings. Such authors typically used the conclusion as a basis for their view that purgatory is false, though it is notable that Leibniz does not do so. Nor does he do so in any of his letters which repeat his claim that neither Augustine nor the early Fathers generally had a consistent notion of purgatory, and that therefore there could not have been an established doctrine at the time;²⁷ in each case Leibniz stops short of drawing the conclusion that purgatory is false.

²⁵ A I 10, 90.

²⁶ These are *Enchiridion* chapters 68 and 69, *On Eight Questions to Dulcitus* 1, *On Faith and Works* 16.29, and *City of God* 21.26.

²⁷ See A I 7, 325; A I 8, 209; A I 18, 244. See also A I 7, 229 in conjunction with A I 7, 257. In the so-called *Examination of the Christian Religion* (1686), Leibniz repeats his claim that the Fathers did not offer a consistent account of purgatory: “The holy Fathers, it is true, vary with regard to the manner of purgation, for some believed that souls are detained for a considerable time (which some have extended all the way to the day of judgement, and some even further) in a certain place, where they are purged over time. Others established that the mode of punishment consists in corporeal fire, some say in the fire of tribulation, a view to which St. Augustine

The same is true of his response to the second proof for purgatory, i.e. that which is based on the practice of saying prayers for the dead. In another paper from 1677 (“Consideration of the strongest passages from holy scripture and the holy fathers which are adduced in favour of purgatory”), Leibniz offers three reasons for thinking that this practice does not entail the truth of purgatory. First, he claims that it does not necessarily follow from the practice of saying prayers for the dead that the dead are actually helped by prayers. Yet this does not undermine the practice itself, according to Leibniz, since offering prayers for the dead is a natural human response which “conforms to usage and a certain natural instinct,”²⁸ and consequently such prayers can still be useful inasmuch as they serve as an expression both of one’s love for the deceased and the belief that everything ultimately comes down to God’s will.

Leibniz’s second response is to argue that even if it is true that the dead are helped by prayers, it nevertheless does not follow that they are undergoing punishment, as it might be that they are able to obtain greater glory (rather than remission of punishment) by means of these prayers. Leibniz’s third response is to claim that even if it is true that the dead will undergo post-mortem punishment, it does not follow that “*the purgatory of the Roman Church exists*, for the ancient Greeks understood it [purgatory] with regard to one’s own purgatory, which they thought everyone endures inclined at one time, and one which is even held today by some Greeks. Some, however, thought the purifying fire is the same as the fire of hell, while others thought that the two are distinct. There have even been those who situate purgatory specifically at the time of the resurrection, when all, even the Saints, will have to pass through fire, although the only ones who will be burned, or suffer loss, are those whose work is so badly fashioned that it can be burned.”A VI 4, 2455.

²⁸ A VI 4, 2125.

on the day of the resurrection.”²⁹ In other words, from the practice of saying prayers for the dead it does not follow that the dead are subject to punishment *between the times of death and resurrection*, as Catholic thinkers often suppose, as it could be that they will be punished *after* being resurrected (the belief Leibniz refers to as “purgatory of the resurrection”).

As noted above, Leibniz does not draw from this analysis the conclusion that the doctrine of purgatory is false. In fact he does not draw any conclusion at all, seemingly satisfied just to undermine the “prayers for the dead” argument and leave it at that. This is testimony to Leibniz’s cautious reasoning, as of course if the argument in favor of the doctrine is faulty it does not follow that the doctrine is likewise faulty, so to make such a claim—which many of his fellow Protestants did—would be highly problematic. Yet Leibniz’s willingness to attack the arguments offered in favor of purgatory, together with his unwillingness to attack the doctrine itself, raises questions about his motivation: what exactly did he hope to achieve? We find a clue in the covering letter sent with “St. Augustine’s opinion on purgatory,” wherein Leibniz notes that the upshot of his analysis is that “the Roman church has changed in a matter of faith.”³⁰ It would be easy to dismiss this as a simple anti-Catholic sideswipe, and while Leibniz *is* critical of Catholicism on the matter of purgatory, this is not because he thinks the doctrine is false. Instead his position is the subtler one that *there are insufficient grounds for Catholics to consider purgatory an article of faith*. This is also the natural reading of Leibniz’s remarks to his Protestant correspondent Johann Fabricius:

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ A I 10, 90.

it is absolutely certain that it is not possible to demonstrate any apostolic tradition (which the articles of faith require) in favour of the purgatory of the Roman Church.³¹

In a later letter Leibniz notes that “[i]n the articles of faith there is a great presumption against anything which cannot be proved,” before proceeding to argue that purgatory cannot be proved via the common route of having the consent of the Church Fathers. Leibniz’s logic is clear enough: purgatory does not have sufficient grounding to be considered an article of faith. The proper Protestant response to it, according to Leibniz, is not to introduce a “negative” article of faith to the effect that “purgatory is false”; instead “[i]t is enough to deny that purgatory is an article of faith.”³²

III

Leibniz’s rejection of purgatory as an article of faith did not prevent him from being sympathetic to the doctrine itself, as we have seen. Given his belief that the most commonly adduced arguments in favor of purgatory are unable to establish it, the question with which we are now faced is this: why did Leibniz accept purgatory? The answer is to be found in an as-yet unpublished text from 1704, in which Leibniz states:

³¹ A I 18, 244.

³² A I 18, 390. Leibniz goes on to state: “I myself would not dare to swear that there is nothing analogous to purgatory.”

The remission of sins which delivers us from the pains of Hell by virtue of the blood of Jesus Christ does not, however, prevent there from still being some punishment in this life or in the other, and the one which is in store for us in the other life serving to purge souls is called *purgatory*. Holy Scripture insinuates it, and reason endorses it on the grounds that according to the rules of perfect government, which is God's government, there should be no sin left entirely unpunished.³³

Leibniz clearly believes that the argument in the final sentence of this passage is philosophical in nature, and accordingly I shall term it his "argument from reason." Thus stated, the argument from reason is clearly incomplete and stands in need of fleshing out. The key claim is that no sin should be left unpunished, a point Leibniz insists on in numerous other writings,³⁴ not least because it follows from his notion of divine justice. According to Leibniz, meting out punishment for every sin is the fulfilment of God's avenging or vindictive justice, that is, his desire to restore the moral order which was put out of balance by sin. Leibniz informs us that

³³ LH 1, 7, 5 Bl. 119r. I would like to thank the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hanover, for granting me permission to publish my translations of portions from this manuscript.

³⁴ "It is consistent with the laws of the best commonwealth, of which God is the monarch, that there be no good deed without reward, and no sin without punishment." A VI 4, 2351. See also A VI 4, 2239/L220; A II 2, 312/L 360; G III, 389/SLT 152; G VI 545/L 590; G VI 605/L 640.

[t]his justice has its foundation only in the fitness of things, which demands a certain satisfaction for the expiation of an evil action... [I]t always has some foundation in that fitness of things which gives satisfaction not only to the injured but also to the wise who see it; even as a beautiful piece of music, or again a good piece of architecture, satisfies cultivated minds... And one may even say that there is here a certain compensation of the mind, which would be scandalized by disorder if the chastisement did not contribute towards restoring order.³⁵

Yet the fact that God will ensure no sin is left unpunished does not, in itself, establish purgatory: for that, it must also be the case that not all sins are punished *in this life*. As it happens Leibniz often claimed as much, stating that because wicked people are in this life often prosperous and happy, “it is evident that far too often punishments are deferred to another life.”³⁶ There are in fact two separate claims in this remark; the first is that not all sins are punished in this life, the second that sins not punished in this life are punished afterwards. As Leibniz holds both to be true, it is reasonable to suppose that the following argument represents his “argument from reason” for purgatory:

P1. No sin is left unpunished

P2. Not all sins are punished in this life

P3. Any sin not punished in this life is punished after this life.

³⁵ G VI 141/H 161-2.

³⁶ Gr 372/SLT 205.

Conclusion. Therefore some sins are punished after this life³⁷

This argument differs from the ones we encountered earlier in that it is entirely philosophical; the heart derives from one of Leibniz's core philosophical beliefs (P1) and an empirical observation (P2). The fact that it refers neither to scripture nor tradition suggests that it is designed to support Leibniz's longstanding aim of formulating a rational theology capable of uniting all Christians, if not all humans.

The argument itself is simple enough, although it is not clear as it stands that it does indeed establish purgatory, at least as it is traditionally understood. Leibniz's explicit reference to punishment may come across as problematic, given that in session XXV of the Council of Trent, in which the doctrine of purgatory was formally stated, there is no mention of punishment at all. Even today, the parts of Catechism of

³⁷ Given his strong belief in God's justice and mercy, it is perhaps surprising that Leibniz does not consider a different argument, namely that purgatory is established by God's mercy towards those who are essentially good but who have been unable to attain sanctification prior to death. Such an argument can be found in the work of Isaac Papin, who argues that God's "mercy does not permit him to have no regard for the efforts of those who have worked sincerely for their sanctification during this life, but who have not attained the perfection before their death." According to Papin, the only reasonable conclusion to draw from this is that after this life, "he [God] makes them pass through a state in which they can deliver themselves from the remnants of sin, and finish losing all the bad habits that they had contracted on the earth, in order to be able to enter into a perfect communion with the Saint of Saints." Isaac Papin, *Les deux voies opposées en matière de religion, l'examen particulier et l'autorité*, 2nd ed. (Liège, 1713), 336.

the Catholic Church concerned with purgatory (§§1030-2) do not mention punishments, but rather purification and cleansing. Nevertheless purgatory has been traditionally understood to involve punishment,³⁸ so the fact that Leibniz's argument makes explicit reference to it does not in itself constitute a weakness.

Of much greater concern is the fact that the post-mortem punishment Leibniz has in mind is meted out to restore the moral order, rather than purify the sinner. In fact Leibniz is clear that God's avenging justice, which as we have seen is what leads him to inflict punishments after the death of the sinner, is "a kind of justice which has for its goal neither improvement nor example, nor even redress of the evil. This justice has its foundation only in the fitness of things, which demands a certain satisfaction for the expiation of an evil action"³⁹ Now if post-mortem punishment is meted out to expiate sin and so restore the moral order, then it is not clear that such punishment will be purifying or cleansing, as purgatorial punishment is in fact supposed to be. The concern, then, is that Leibniz's argument for purgatory in fact falls short of establishing the traditional conception of purgatory as a place or state in which sinners are purged of their faults, since the punishment Leibniz envisages as awaiting the sinner after death is not inherently corrective or medicinal, purely expiatory.

There is little doubt that Leibniz's response to this concern would be to say that while post-mortem punishment is imposed for reason of expiation, it nevertheless also has a corrective, purgatorial effect. We already know that Leibniz considers God's punishment of sins to be expiatory; that it is likewise corrective is affirmed in the unpublished paper from 1704 we met earlier, in which he writes of post-mortem punishment: "It is true that blessed souls shall suffer it with joy, just as we willingly

³⁸ See for example Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* supplement, appendix II, q1a.

³⁹ G VI 141/ H 161.

suffer a surgical operation that restores us to health.”⁴⁰ In Leibniz’s view, then, by meting out punishment after a sinner’s death God is able to accomplish the two distinct tasks of expiating and correcting the sinner, despite the fact that the former is the actual purpose of the punishment. One might consider Leibniz’s implied suggestion that post-mortem punishment is both expiatory and corrective to be a little hopeful, or even naive. Such a concern is not obviously well-grounded, however, and if anything stems from the fact that the modern mind is accustomed to various distinctive theories of punishment, each of which advocates punishment for very distinct ends. Yet not all of these theories of punishment are mutually exclusive, and there is no obvious reason why a particular punishment cannot serve two distinct ends at all. In fact Leibniz’s insinuation that it does so is in accord with traditional thinking on the matter; for example, when discussing purgatory, Aquinas clearly takes post-mortem punishment to be both expiatory (i.e. required by justice) and corrective.⁴¹ I take it, then, that there is no inherent problem in the fact that Leibniz considers post-mortem punishment to be administered with the aim of expiation, while nevertheless also claiming that it has a corrective (purgative) effect on the sinner.

IV

Undoubtedly the most pressing question for the Leibniz scholar, however, concerns the type of purgatory that Leibniz advocates. As we have seen, he distinguishes between the traditional form, where a soul is punished immediately after death, and the purgatory of the resurrection, where body and soul are punished together,

⁴⁰ LH 1, 7, 5 Bl. 119r.

⁴¹ See Aquinas, *op. cit.*, q1 and q2.

following the resurrection. Leibniz's argument from reason does not favor one notion of purgatory over the other, nor is there anything in those of his remarks we have considered thus far that would suggest a preference. To the best of my knowledge, Leibniz does not express a preference elsewhere either. Nevertheless through an analysis of some of Leibniz's explicit statements on the afterlife, I think it is possible to reconstruct the notion of purgatory he is likely to have favored. It is, I believe, a hybrid view whereby purgatory consists in temporal punishment beginning immediately after a person's death, yet applying not to a disembodied soul but rather to the soul together with whatever remnants of the body remain with it. As such, Leibniz's likely view is closer to the traditional notion of purgatory than it is to the purgatory of the resurrection.

It is at least certain that Leibniz could not have accepted the traditional notion in its entirety, as throughout his career he insisted that no souls, whether those of animals, humans or angels, are ever entirely separate from matter.⁴² In his youthful writings he commits himself to the doctrine of the "flower of substance," which holds that the soul is "substantially united" to a subtle, material core—the flower of substance—which serves as the seat of the soul.⁴³ During normal life, this core diffuses itself

⁴² There is at least one text in which Leibniz explicitly acknowledges separate souls, the *Examination of the Christian Religion* of 1686 (A VI 4, 2451). However this text was written from a Catholic point of view, and is not a reliable indicator of Leibniz's own views. Robert Adams rightly claims that the *Examination* "is not credible...as a personal theological confession" on the grounds that it contains a number of doctrines which are clearly not Leibniz's own. See Robert Adams, "Leibniz's *Examination of the Christian Religion*," *Faith and Philosophy* 11 (1994): 517-546, at 537.

⁴³ A VI 1, 533.

throughout whatever quantity of gross or coarse matter happens to constitute a person's body. Although this gross or coarse matter is dissipated after death, the soul remains attached to its material core (as indeed it was before birth). At the time of the resurrection, this core is supplemented once again by a quantity of other matter, through which it diffuses itself. Consequently the soul always remains embodied, in the sense that it is always joined to a material core.⁴⁴ By the middle of his career Leibniz appears to have abandoned this doctrine (the last mention of it in his corpus occurs in a long ecumenical treatise from 1686),⁴⁵ though he continued to accept that souls are never without bodies. From the mid-1680s or thereabouts, Leibniz reached this conclusion by way of another theory he had developed—the hypothesis of the pre-established harmony. On this hypothesis, souls and bodies each follow their own laws but nevertheless harmonize with each other as if there were causal interaction between them. By virtue of this harmony, souls are connected not just to their own bodies but to everything else, since the least change in one body ripples through to affect all of the others; the end result is a perfect order between all the parts of the created universe. But this would not be the case if there were disembodied souls, as such souls would cease to be connected to the rest of the world, and hence not be part of the universal order instituted by God. As God would not permit such a disharmonious state of affairs to obtain, it follows that there can be no disembodied souls, except for God, who alone stands outside of the universal order:

⁴⁴ For further information on the “flower of substance” doctrine, see Lloyd Strickland, “Leibniz, the flower of substance, and the resurrection of the same body,” *The Philosophical Forum* 40 (2009): 391-410.

⁴⁵ A VI 4, 2454.

God alone is above all matter, since he is its Author. But creatures free or freed from matter would be at the same time detached from the universal connection, and like deserters from the general order.⁴⁶

Consequently, after death the soul “still remains united to something organic, although very subtle.”⁴⁷ In other words, while the soul ceases to be joined to the grosser parts of the body (which in any case are destroyed after death), it continues to be joined to some (unspecified) organs, giving it what Leibniz refers to as a “subtle body,”⁴⁸ which in turn gives it a permanent connection to everything else in the world.

In the final decade or so of his life, Leibniz developed a further reason to reject the idea of disembodied souls: the principle of uniformity. This holds that “it is always and everywhere in all things just as it is here,” so from the fact that we are embodied souls now we can deduce that we will always be embodied, and also that other created beings—even angels—are likewise never separate from matter. Hence

⁴⁶ G VI 546/L 590. Translation modified. See also G II 324/LDB 79: “to remove them [intelligences] from bodies and place is to remove them from the universal connection and order of the world.” The denial of separate souls is found in numerous places in Leibniz’s works, e.g. G VI 533/L 556-7; G VI 619/L 650; G VII 535; G VII 406/L 707.

⁴⁷ K 183.

⁴⁸ G VI 533/L 556-7.

in accordance with this principle [sc. of uniformity] there will never be separate souls, nor intelligences entirely detached from matter, except the sovereign mind, author of everything and of matter itself.⁴⁹

So while death may seem to involve a separation of soul and body, in reality it cannot, as human souls are always embodied, even if only in a “subtle” body. Leibniz, then, could not have accepted that purgatory applies to disembodied souls as he consistently denied (albeit for various reasons) that there were disembodied souls. Any post-mortem punishment—whether it happens to be meted out immediately after death or only after the resurrection—will, for Leibniz, be applied to embodied souls, as those are the only kind of souls he recognizes.

This leads us to the question of when Leibniz thinks punishment will be meted out to those deserving of it. Although I cannot find any writings in which Leibniz directly addresses this question, let alone advances an answer to it, I think it likely he would hold that punishment begins immediately after death. To understand why, we need to consider his views on the posthumous experiences of the damned. In an early work, *The Philosopher’s Confession* (1672-3), Leibniz states that the damned are those who are discontented with the world, i.e. God’s work, and with God himself. When such people die, they carry their hatred with them into the afterlife, and because they no longer have any sense organs to provide new material to think about, their hatred grows stronger and stronger via a process of positive feedback:

Whoever dies malcontent dies a hater of God. And now he follows along the road on which he began, as if he were headed for the precipice; and not being

⁴⁹ G III 344.

held back by external things, since access to his senses has been closed off, he nourishes his soul, which has withdrawn into itself, with that hatred of things already begun, and with that misery and disdain, and with indignation, envy, and displeasure, all of them increasing more and more.

Leibniz goes on to claim that the hatred, anger and misery of the damned person is not eased by the return of his bodily senses in the resurrection, because by that time he is so twisted that his pain is somehow pleasing to him. Consequently, after being resurrected, he will deliberately seek out things which incense him, and hence

he endlessly finds new material for contempt, disapproval, and anger; and he is the more tormented the less he can change and endure the torrent of things that are displeasing to him.⁵⁰

The upshot is that his hatred of God and the world continues without end, as does the torment that this hatred brings.⁵¹ Although Leibniz only offers what we might call a “psychology of the damned,” it is possible to piece together a cognate “psychology of the saved,” as it were. To begin with, it seems correct to attribute to Leibniz the view that any given person’s final thoughts (or state of mind) will dominate his posthumous thoughts (or state of mind), irrespective of whether he is saved or damned. As Leibniz explains:

⁵⁰ A VI 3, 142/CP 91.

⁵¹ For further details, see Lloyd Strickland, “Leibniz on eternal punishment,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009): 307-331.

For since the soul is not open to new external sensations from the moment of death until its body is restored to it, it concentrates its attention only on its last thoughts, so that it does not change but rather extends the state it was in at death.⁵²

There seems no reason to suppose that this would not hold good of those who are saved as well as those who are damned. But what separates the saved from the damned, of course, is that the former do not die hating God and the world. Presumably the majority of the saved are essentially good, but nevertheless not perfect, and will end their lives with unexpiated sins and some relatively minor faults. Given this, it is not unreasonable to surmise that it is these things which dominate the thinking of the saved after death, i.e. they will focus on their sins and moral flaws, which will torment them since they are essentially good. Further details as to the posthumous psychology of the saved are a matter of speculation, but at the very least it is likely that the posthumous pain and anguish they feel about their sins and flaws serves as both their expiatory and corrective punishment. Leibniz hints as much when he writes in an early fragment:

⁵² A VI 3, 118-9/CP 35-7, cf. A VI 3, 138-9/CP 83. The reference in this passage to a person's soul, and to the restoration of the body in the resurrection, gives the impression that Leibniz is endorsing the existence of disembodied souls. This is most likely just carelessness on Leibniz's part, since *The Philosopher's Confession* was written during the time he accepted the "flower of substance" doctrine, which specifically disallows disembodied souls.

The time of purification lasts as long as is needed for a soul to turn over in its contemplations the wickedness of its former sin, and therefore this pain consists in a vision of sin, evil and the devil, just as heavenly joy consists in the vision of God and the good.⁵³

The process of purification can thus be seen as a natural process, not requiring any special intervention by God. Similarly, the descent into permanent self-punishing madness experienced by the damned can be seen as a natural process, in that it is just what happens when an evil and disgruntled will is left to reflect on its own thoughts in the afterlife. There is certainly no suggestion in Leibniz's work that God makes the wicked mad.⁵⁴ Moreover, Leibniz seems to consider the torment brought on by this madness to be not just a punishment, but the *only* punishment that the damned will face in the afterlife: certainly he does not mention any other kind of punishment or torment, such as pain directly inflicted by God, nor is there any indication that he thought the wicked would be literally afflicted by fire. In a similar vein, purgatorial punishment seems to be nothing more than the torment experienced by a good person who is forced to reflect at great length on his own sins and moral failings. The difference between the two cases is that those undergoing purgatorial punishment will emerge from it in a purified state. Consequently their torment cannot be so acute or intense as to induce madness, but rather must be of an intensity that, for an essentially good person, is enough to bring about amendment. The purification process can

⁵³ D VI, 310.

⁵⁴ The traditional view held that God made the wills of the wicked immutably evil in the afterlife as punishment for their sins. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* supp. q98a6; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV: 93.

therefore be considered a natural function of the basic psychology of good (but imperfect) people and the circumstances in which they find themselves after death.

Further support for this account of Leibnizian purgatory can be found in Leibniz's doctrine of "natural retribution," which holds that all sins naturally or mechanically lead to their own punishment without any divine intervention whatsoever ("sins carry their punishment with them by the order of nature, and by virtue of the mechanical structure of things itself").⁵⁵ My suggestion that Leibniz construed purgatory as a period of self-inflicted torment, arising from a forced, intense scrutiny of one's own sins and moral failings, certainly satisfies this stipulation. Moreover, if Leibniz were inclined to favor the purgatory of the resurrection instead, it is unclear what natural process he could invoke to account for the punishment of unexpiated sins. The peculiar circumstances that he takes to prevail between a person's death and resurrection are much more promising in this regard. It is thus plausible to suppose that Leibniz holds purgatorial punishment to occur while in the *status medius* rather than at the time of the resurrection. Leibniz's likely view of purgatory can be summarized as follows: after death, a person's soul remains attached to the subtler parts of the body but loses the grosser or coarser parts, including the sense organs. Without these organs furnishing new material to think about, the person's thoughts are focused solely on his sins and moral failings, which torment him; and these torments serve as both expiatory and corrective punishment, such that when the person is resurrected he is purified and ready for admission to God's kingdom.

Yet there is some uncertainty as to whether Leibniz could have accepted this account of purgatory throughout the whole of his career. The key text underpinning

⁵⁵ G VI, 622/P 193, cf. Gr 374/SLT 207; Gr 581/SLT 169; G VI, 142/H 162; G VI, 605/P 202.

the account I have ascribed to him, namely *The Philosopher's Confession*, was written in the early 1670s, and the crucial claim found in it, that the posthumous attention of the dead is focused solely on their final thoughts, does not appear to have been made again after 1686.⁵⁶ Although Leibniz's later writings do contain numerous statements about how death affects human psychological activity, they are much less detailed. The following passage is representative of Leibniz's later thought:

In death ... we do not lose life, sensation or reason, but what prevents us from noticing that for a time is the confusion, that is, the fact that at that time we have an infinity of little perceptions all at once, in which there is no single one which is clearly distinguished from the others. That is why in a dream that is barely distinct, and in a fainting fit, we remember nothing.

At first glance these remarks would appear unfavorable to the idea of posthumous scrutiny of one's own sins and moral faults, which I have suggested is characteristic of Leibniz's notion of purgatory, since they suggest that there is little posthumous psychological activity to speak of, and what there is of it is unmemorable. Yet Leibniz continues to claim that

the order of degrees in the suspension of activities is not always observed in the way that has been indicated, as if it was up to reason to stop first; for we

⁵⁶ See A VI, 4, 2360/SLT 204.

sometimes reasons in dreams, when we sense nothing at all—I mean distinctly, since we always sense confusedly.⁵⁷

This leaves open the possibility that while our sensations become confused after death, our reason remains unimpaired and fully active. Leibniz is certainly of the view that in death we have no conscious perceptions,⁵⁸ from which it follows that such perceptions would not be a distraction from any rational thoughts we do happen to have. However Leibniz also refers to the psychological state of the dead as being akin to a “stupor,”⁵⁹ a claim not easily squared with there being any posthumous scrutiny of one’s own sins and moral faults, or torments arising therefrom. What are we to make of this? I doubt that anything definitive can be drawn from it one way or another. The lack of sensations and the “stupor” that characterize death in Leibniz’s later thought seem intended to apply to a person’s perceptual activity, or lack of it, and may be consistent with the person’s higher functions, reflection and reason, remaining unaffected. But on the other hand, Leibniz says nothing definitive in his later writings to the effect that reflection and reason do continue unhindered from the time of death to the resurrection. In all likelihood he was unwilling to commit himself either way, with this unwillingness no doubt owing much to the belief, adopted in

⁵⁷ LBr. F 27, 73a. I would like to thank the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hanover, for granting me permission to publish my translations of portions from this manuscript.

⁵⁸ G VII 330/SLT 65; G VI 610/L 645.

⁵⁹ G VII 330/SLT 65.

later life, that “the status of intermediate souls is an obscure matter, and one not sufficiently revealed by God.”⁶⁰

V

It is time now to summarize our findings. From the foregoing discussion I think it reasonable to assert that Leibniz was sympathetic to the doctrine of purgatory throughout his career, as expressions of sympathy towards it can be found in his early, middle and later writings, and he advances no objections to the doctrine itself, merely to its being considered an article of faith. The argument he advances for it is derived from his core philosophical belief that God’s justice will not allow any sin to go unpunished, and from his empirical observation that not all sins are punished in this life. The notion of purgatory he initially appears to favor involves the dead being punished immediately after death via a process of self-torment arising out of concentrated reflection on their sins and moral failings; evidence for this notion is noticeably absent in later writings, making it a matter of conjecture as to whether he retained any sympathy for it or not. Yet even if he did not remain sympathetic to the notion of purgatory outlined above, he did to the doctrine itself. While it is tempting to suppose that this was due to certain Catholic leanings on his part,⁶¹ this temptation should be resisted. While Leibniz did sometimes describe himself as “Catholic at

⁶⁰ A I 18, 390.

⁶¹ It has been argued that Leibniz was, privately at least, a Catholic, partly on the basis of his views about purgatory. See Charles William Russell, “Protestant evidence of Catholicity,” *The Dublin Review* 10 (1841): 394-429, at 429.

heart,”⁶² he did not mean this in terms of his doctrinal beliefs, but rather his commitment to the principles of a catholic, in the sense of “universal,” rational religion, i.e. charity motivated by a love of God. Yet his sympathy to the doctrine of purgatory shows that he saw a place for some elements of Catholicism within his ideal, rational theology.⁶³

⁶² A I 6, 235.

⁶³ My thanks to Daniel J. Cook, Vernon Pratt, Patrick Sherry, and an anonymous *ACPQ* referee for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.