

## Leibniz on eternal punishment

Around fifty years after Leibniz's death, a debate erupted in Germany concerning his views on the Christian doctrine of eternal punishment of the wicked. On the one side was Johann August Eberhard, who argued in his *Neue Apologie des Sokrates* [*New Apology for Socrates*] (1772) that Leibniz secretly rejected this doctrine in favour of the view that all humans would eventually be saved. On the other side was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who argued in his *Leibniz von den Ewigen Strafen* [*Leibniz on eternal punishment*] (1773) that Leibniz had in fact been an adherent of the doctrine of eternal punishment.<sup>1</sup> Although the debate between Eberhard and Lessing is not without historical interest, and certainly worthy of study in its own right, my intention here is not to give a commentary on their debate but rather to reopen it, in response to recent claims made by a number of Leibniz scholars.

The issue, in a nutshell, is over Leibniz's orthodoxy on the matter of eschatology, or more precisely, on the fate of the wicked. Broadly speaking, in Leibniz's day there were three different positions one could take on this matter. The traditional view stated that the wicked would be damned, i.e. suffer eternal punishment in hell, though there was obvious disagreement among supporters of this view as to how many would be damned and why those people in particular. The second view, which we might call the annihilationist view, stated that the wicked would be punished in hell for a certain period of time before being annihilated. The third view, universal salvation, stated that the wicked would experience 'corrective' punishment of finite duration, after

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<sup>1</sup> Lessing's essay is now available in an English translation in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, translated and edited by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 37-60.

which they would all be saved. The question with which we shall be concerned in this paper is the very one which concerned Eberhard and Lessing, namely: which of the above views did Leibniz believe to be true? The best way to answer this question is of course to conduct a thorough examination of Leibniz's writings on the ultimate fate of the wicked, as this will reveal not only Leibniz's position but also how he arrived at it, how he defended it, and whether it underwent any change.<sup>2</sup> To anticipate the result of our examination, I believe that Leibniz held (and only ever held) the traditional view, i.e. that the wicked will suffer eternal punishment. In making this claim I aim to overturn what has become the prevailing view among Leibniz scholars, which is that he rejected the doctrine of eternal punishment. In fact, some have even suggested that Leibniz endorsed the doctrine of universal salvation (no one has, to the best of my knowledge, suggested that Leibniz endorsed the annihilationist position, so I shall say no more about that.) Those who believe that Leibniz rejected eternal punishment include Andrew Carlson,<sup>3</sup> Catherine Wilson,<sup>4</sup> Anne Becco,<sup>5</sup> and Allison Coudert.<sup>6</sup> Of

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<sup>2</sup> Such an examination is in fact worthwhile in itself since the ultimate fate of the wicked is a sorely neglected area of Leibniz's thought. Most discussions of it in the secondary literature are very brief. There are three exceptions. (1) Lessing's essay *Leibniz von den Ewigen Strafen* (1773), which is now very dated. (2) Aloys Pichler, *Die Theologie des Leibniz aus sämtlichen gedruckten und vielen noch ungedruckten Quellen* (Munich, 1870; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965) Vol. II, pp. 422-8. This treatment is also dated. Many relevant texts were not available at the times Lessing and Pichler wrote. (3) D. P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964) 207-17.

Although Walker had at his disposal a greater range of texts than did Lessing and Pichler, his treatment largely focuses on what Leibniz says in the *Theodicy* (1710) with little account taken of other writings.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Carlson, *The Divine Ethic of Creation in Leibniz* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Wilson, 'The reception of Leibniz in the eighteenth century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, edited by Nicholas Jolley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

these, only the latter takes into consideration possible diachronic changes in Leibniz's views, arguing that Leibniz's initial support for eternal punishment gave way to support for universal salvation around the late 1690s. This, as I shall show, is incorrect.

The structure of the remainder of the paper is as follows. In section 1, I shall examine texts which show not only that Leibniz sought to establish and justify the doctrine of eternal punishment throughout his career, but also how he proposed to do so. In section 2, I shall examine the theoretical underpinnings behind Leibniz's support for this doctrine. In section 3, I shall consider how Leibniz sought to ensure that his endorsement of eternal punishment was consistent with his other philosophical commitments, specifically with his system of theodicy. Then in sections 4 and 5 I shall examine texts connected with two projects from the last decade of Leibniz's life which, it has been claimed, contain evidence of Leibniz's disbelief in eternal punishment. I shall show that while none of the texts adduced contain such evidence, some of them do suggest that Leibniz adopted a surprisingly relaxed attitude towards the rival doctrine of universal salvation late in his life.

## I.

Leibniz's support for the doctrine of eternal punishment is expressed in a variety of ways throughout his vast corpus. In some texts he simply affirms (or takes for granted) the reality of eternal punishment, in others that some people will be damned,

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Becco, 'Leibniz et François-Mercure van Helmont: bagatelle pour des monades', *Magis Naturalis*, 7 (1978): 119-42.

<sup>6</sup> Allison P. Coudert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995).

and in others that not all people will be saved.<sup>7</sup> But of course a thinker's commitment to a doctrine or idea is not only manifested in his explicit or implicit affirmations of it, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in his attempts to establish its truth and to defend it against objections. Our primary concern in this section is thus to determine how Leibniz established and justified the doctrine of eternal punishment.

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<sup>7</sup> Three of the texts in which Leibniz expresses his support for the doctrine of eternal punishment in one or other of these ways (and which are not otherwise cited in this paper) are Gr 252, 255, 493. The abbreviations I use throughout when citing Leibniz are as follows: A = *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, edited by Akademie der Wissenschaften, multiple volumes in 6 series, cited by series (reihe) and volume (band) (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1923-). AG = *Philosophical Essays*, translated and edited by Roger Ariew & Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989). CP = *Confessio Philosophi*, translated and edited by Robert Sleigh Jr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). D = *G. G. Leibnitii Opera Omnia*, edited by L. Dutens, 6 volumes (Geneva, 1768). G = *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, edited by C. I. Gerhardt, 7 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875-1890). Gr = *Textes inédits*, edited by Gaston Grua, 2 vols. with successive pagination (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948). GW = *Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und Christian Wolff*, edited by C. I. Gerhardt (Halle: H. W. Schmidt, 1860). H = *Theodicy*, translated by E. M. Huggard (Chicago: Open Court, 1990). HD = *De l'horizon de la doctrine humaine*, edited by Michael Fichant (Paris: Vrin, 1991). K = *Correspondenz von Leibniz mit der Prinzessin Sophie*, edited by Onno Klopp, 3 vols. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1973). LH = unpublished manuscript, held by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek – Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, Hanover, Germany. NE = *New Essays on Human Understanding*, translated and edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). P = *Philosophical Writings*, translated by Mary Morris and G. H. R. Parkinson, edited by G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent, 1973). S = *Monadology and other philosophical essays*, translated and edited by Paul Schrecker and Anne Martin Schrecker, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965). SLT = *Shorter Leibniz Texts*, translated and edited by 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.

Few texts are better suited to this end than the *Philosopher's Confession* (1672-3), which contains probably the longest discussion of the issues of damnation and eternal punishment to be found in any of Leibniz's works. That in it Leibniz comes down firmly in favour of the doctrine of eternal punishment is not in doubt, but why he thinks there will be such punishment is not so clear cut. At one stage he refers to mortal sin as 'the basis of damnation' (A VI, 3, 138/CP 83), but he does not appear to construe this in the traditional sense, that is, as a sin of such gravity that, when knowingly and willingly committed, it merits eternal damnation of itself (unless absolved).<sup>8</sup> For Leibniz tells us that those who commit such sins 'are always damnable but never damned' because 'at no time are they henceforth damned for all eternity. They are always damnable; they are always able to be set free, but they never

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<sup>8</sup> In fact there are two texts in which Leibniz does appear to accept the traditional idea of mortal sin. In the *Catholic Demonstrations* of 1669, Leibniz writes 'he who dies in a state of mortal sin dies incorrigible,' (A VI, 1, 497) and continues to explain that mortal sin, unlike venial, is 'voluntary' and leaves one 'in a willing state of pugnacity, rebellion and enmity towards God' (A VI 1, 498). In the *Examination of the Christian Religion*, probably written in 1686, Leibniz states that mortal sins 'merit eternal ruin' because they are 'committed by an evil mind and against the express conscience and the principles of virtue innate in the mind' (A VI, 4, 2360/SLT 203-4), such that 'Whenever a soul which departs from the body is in a state of mortal sin, and thus ill disposed towards God, it falls into the abyss of ruin by its own will' (A VI, 4, 2451). However Leibniz deliberately wrote both texts from a Catholic perspective, and so it is unclear whether they ought to be considered as reliable guides to his own view. Robert Adams states of the *Examination* that 'is not credible...as a personal theological confession' as it contains a number of doctrines which are clearly not Leibniz's own. The same, I think, may be said of the *Catholic Demonstrations*. See Robert Adams, 'Leibniz's *Examination of the Christian Religion*', *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994): 537.

will it' (A VI, 3, 138/CP 81).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, according to Leibniz, 'they damn themselves again and again' by continuing to sin throughout eternity (A VI, 3, 139/CP 83).<sup>10</sup> The implication here is that, for Leibniz, eternal punishment is predicated on eternal sin, i.e. it is the (infinite) *quantity* of sins committed that merits eternal punishment rather than the enormity of one or more of them.<sup>11</sup> Such a view obviously commits Leibniz to a morally dynamic afterlife, in which sinners can acquire demerit or (theoretically) merit through their choice of actions. This is an unorthodox idea, even for a 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran, but it is in no way unique to Leibniz.<sup>12</sup>

Now as we have seen, Leibniz refers to the wicked as 'damnable' rather than 'damned'; this is to some extent a Leibnizian sleight of hand, since in his system God foreknows every action of every created being, which means that God will foreknow that there are those who will never freely repent and who thus merit eternal punishment. Such people are, for all intents and purposes, damned. By referring to them as 'damnable' Leibniz evidently wishes to stress that God never makes an irreversible decision as to their fate, that is, that God does not sentence anyone to

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<sup>9</sup> And again: 'The damned are never damned absolutely; they are always worthy of damnation.' A VI, 3, 142/CP 93.

<sup>10</sup> Translation modified.

<sup>11</sup> To be more specific, it is the endless repetition of one sin – hating God and/or the world – that merits eternal punishment, as will become clear in section 2.

<sup>12</sup> In the *Theodicy* (1710), Leibniz attempts to show that accounting for the eternal duration of punishment by the eternal duration of sins has been a popular manoeuvre among those of various Christian creeds. Among those who had used the same argument, he claims, are the Protestant Johann Gerhard, the Calvinist Zacharias Ursinus, and the Jesuit Father Drexler, who suggested (according to Leibniz) that it was also held in high regard by Catholic theologians. He also finds echoes of his view in the work of more philosophically-minded thinkers such as Joannes Fechtius, Pierre Jurieu, Isaac Jacquelot, Jean Le Clerc and William King. See G VI, 276/H 291; G VI, 435/H 441.

eternal punishment, no matter how sinful they are or have been; rather, once the wicked start to be punished in the afterlife, they carry on being punished for as long as they continue to sin; those who always sin are always punished, but are not damned for their recidivism. However Leibniz does not always observe the distinction between the damnable and the damned; it is entirely absent in later writings as far as I can tell, and not always utilised in the *Philosopher's Confession*.<sup>13</sup> I suspect the reason behind Leibniz's unwillingness to maintain the damned/damnably distinction that he himself drew was that it would be worth maintaining only if some or all of the damnably would at some point cease to be so, in which case it would make sense to use the epithet 'damnably' rather than 'damned'. But I can find no evidence in Leibniz's writings to suggest he thought that any person who enters the afterlife in a damnably state would actually repent and be promoted to the ranks of the blessed. Hence for practical purposes there is little reason for Leibniz to insist on the distinction, because the end result – that the wicked suffer eternal punishment – is the same either way.

The claims implicit in the *Philosopher's Confession*, namely that the wicked always continue to sin and thus always have to be punished, and that an eternity of punishment is justified by an eternity of sin, are ones that recur frequently in Leibniz's later writings. For example, in a letter to his patroness Electress Sophie from September 1694, Leibniz explains: 'my view is that punishments would only be eternal because of the eternity of sins. Those who will always sin will always be justly punished' (A I, 10, 59-60). Shortly after this, a copy of a book entitled *Seder Olam*

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<sup>13</sup> In that work Leibniz makes several references to 'the damned' even after having argued that the wicked are damnably rather than damned. See A VI, 3, 143/CP 93, and A VI, 3, 145/CP 99.

[*The Order of the World*] came into Leibniz's possession.<sup>14</sup> This book contains a number of arguments against the doctrine of eternal punishment and in favour of universal salvation, but in commenting on it in a letter written in January 1695 to Lorenz Hertel, Leibniz does not directly address any of these arguments, but rather seeks to justify the doctrine of eternal punishment:

All that can be said about that [i.e. the doctrine of universal salvation] is that it would be true if it were possible, and if divine justice could allow it. But as we do not know the depths of it [i.e. divine justice], it is safer not to advance opinions which are not soundly established and can be harmful since they are capable of keeping sinners in their security. It is very true that there would not be an eternity of punishments if there were not an eternity of sins. For sinners damn themselves, so to speak, and keep themselves in damnation by continuing to sin. (A I, 11, 21)

A decade later in 1705, in a series of private notes on a short pamphlet entitled *An Answer to the Query of a Deist, concerning the Necessity of Faith*, authored by one 'J.C.', Leibniz returns to the issue of how eternal punishment can be justified. In response to the claim by the pamphlet's author that they are justified because sin 'includes a disobedience and repugnance to the known Will and Law of God an Infinite good' and therefore 'carries along with it an infinite degree of Injustice,'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Seder Olam* (London, 1694). Although sometimes attributed to Francis Mercury van Helmont, this book was not penned by van Helmont himself but by an anonymous author 'upon the leave of F. M. Baron of *Helmont*', according to the title page.

<sup>15</sup> J. C., *An Answer to the Query of a Deist, concerning the Necessity of Faith* (1687?) 2.



Leibniz remarks: ‘there is no eternal punishment unless sin is also eternal’ (Gr 249).<sup>16</sup> Leibniz also claims that eternal punishment is justified by the eternal recidivism of the damned in the *Theodicy* (1710), wherein he also tells us that ‘the damned ever bring upon themselves new pains through new sins’ (G VI, 142/H 162) and ‘the penalties of the damned...last on because the malice of the damned lasts on’ (G VI, 447/S 126). In the *Theodicy* and its appendix, the *Causa Dei*, Leibniz affirms the eternal recidivism of the damned three times, (G VI, 142/H 162; G VI, 277/H 292; G VI, 447/S 126) and twice says that such recidivism justifies eternal punishment, (G VI, 186/H 205; G VI, 275/H 290) which gives some indication of the strength of his confidence in these claims.

## II

From what we have seen so far, it is clear that the claim that the wicked sin throughout eternity does a lot of work for Leibniz, as he uses it both to establish and to justify the doctrine of eternal punishment. That Leibniz is serious about this claim is beyond question: I have found no evidence that Leibniz ever came to doubt it, nor has any been advanced. But we might reasonably wonder why Leibniz believed this

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, in one text Leibniz reveals himself to be a supporter of a view not unlike that propounded by ‘J.C.’ In this text, Leibniz writes: ‘The malice of those who die with enmity towards God is infinite, because the will of injuring [him] is an infinite evil.’ (D 6, 1, 310) Unfortunately this passage is undated. Nevertheless it suggests that at some point in his life Leibniz may well have wanted to justify eternal punishment by arguing, as many early moderns did, that as sins are of an infinite degree because they are committed against God, an infinite good, it is just that their punishment should be infinite (i.e. eternal) too. Evidently this was a view that he did not hold in 1705, however.

claim to be true, as it is hardly self-evident. For an answer we need to turn to the *Philosopher's Confession*; there, after asserting that Judas is damned because of 'his burning hatred of God when he died', Leibniz continues to inform us that

this suffices for damnation. 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... *Hence, he who dies hating God damns himself.* (A VI 3 118-9/CP 35-7, cf. A VI, 3, 138-9/CP 83)<sup>17</sup>

Nicholas Steno, who read and criticized the *Philosopher's Confession* in late 1677, made two remarks on this passage. First, he asked 'why can't the soul perceive the conditions of the place in which it resides?', to which Leibniz responded: 'How could it, except through the senses of the body?' Second, Steno wondered why Leibniz should think that the soul of a dying man would be fixated on its last thoughts, and why it could not 'contemplate at one and the same time all the thoughts of its entire life' (A VI, 3, 119/CP 35). Leibniz offered no response to this question, but later in the same work he did offer a more detailed account of why the wicked always sin:

*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

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<sup>17</sup> Also A VI, 4, 2360/SLT 204: 'For as those who withdraw from this life badly disposed towards God are revived without having had any further external sensations, they seem to proceed with the road undertaken and to preserve the state of the soul in which their minds were seized, and because of that they are separated from God, whence by a sort of consequence they fall into the greatest unhappiness of the soul, and hence damn themselves, so to speak.'

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. When he has been reunited with his body and his senses have returned, 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. (A VI, 3, 142/CP 91)

Here Leibniz offers us a ‘psychology of the damned’, so to speak, which enables us to see why he believed that the wicked continue to sin throughout the afterlife. The psychology applies to all those who hate God (which includes those who do not know him, i.e. atheists) and those who are dissatisfied with the world (cf. A VI, 3, 142/CP 91). Now these ‘furious haters of the nature of things’ (A VI, 3, 139/CP 85), as Leibniz calls them, harbour deep frustrations because they desire things to be otherwise than they are but they are unable to change them. Death does not release them from these frustrations, because souls continue to be psychologically active after separation from the body. So when the soul of a malcontent is separated from its body at death, it retains its frustrations and, having no body to furnish it with new sensations that would enable it to think of other things, it focuses its thoughts on what is displeasing to it, i.e. what has made it malcontent in the first place. This increases its feelings of anger and displeasure. The process of discontent fuelling anger continues without abatement because there is nothing else for the malcontented soul to think about or give it relief. Caught in this positive feedback loop, the soul eventually goes mad with anger. This madness is not eased by the return of the body

(and its attendant senses) in the resurrection, because by that time the soul is so twisted that its pain is actually somehow pleasing for it: ‘But pain in some way is transformed into pleasure; and these wretched ones rejoice at finding something by which they are tormented’ (A VI, 3, 142/CP 91). In fact, after the resurrection the damned deliberately *seek out* things which incense them simply because their insanity now makes such things perversely pleasing to them, with the result that their hatred of God and the world continues without end. For the damned have, according to Leibniz,

such a pertinacity, such a perversion of appetite, such an aversion to God that they enjoy nothing more than having something through which they suffer, and they seek nothing more than to discover a reason to be angry. This is the highest degree of the madness of reason; it is voluntary, incorrigible, desperate, eternal. (A VI, 3, 142-3/CP 93)

Hence the madness into which the wicked are plunged after death ultimately becomes so severe as to ensure that they always sin and never repent. Although the wicked retain the freedom to recover themselves, Leibniz informs us that ‘they never will it’ (A VI, 3, 138/CP 81). So the wicked continue to sin, and be worthy of punishment. In the psychology of the damned, then, we find the reason for Leibniz’s belief in the eternal recidivism of the wicked.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> One obvious flaw with Leibniz’s account is that it involves the wicked being punished for things done and views held *while in a state of madness*. This seems unjust. Indeed, Leibniz holds that punishment for criminal actions committed by ‘madmen’ in normal life should be relaxed due to the incapacity of the men committing these actions (cf. A VI, 6, 242/NE 242). Why should the same not apply to sins committed in the afterlife by the wicked? The reason, I suspect, lies in Leibniz’s belief that the madness experienced by the wicked in the afterlife is ‘voluntary’ (A VI, 3, 143/CP 93). If the

But there is more to the psychology of the damned than that; it is also an ingenious example of what Leibniz calls ‘natural retribution,’ as I shall show. It is clear, first of all, that Leibniz considers that a wicked person’s descent into perpetual madness and sin is an entirely 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 that God makes the wicked mad or evil.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Leibniz holds that it is the malcontents’ own choice to sin in this life which causes their eventual madness and perpetual recidivism in the next. Moreover, I think it is likely that Leibniz considers the torment brought on by this madness to be not just a punishment, but the *only* punishment that the wicked will face in the afterlife. He does not mention any other kind of punishment or torment that awaits them, such as pain directly inflicted by God, nor is there any indication that he thought the wicked would be afflicted by fire, or fire-like torment, as was commonly believed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Now, taking these two points together, namely that the wicked go mad in the afterlife through an entirely natural process, and that the torment resulting from this madness is their punishment for their sins, we can see that Leibniz has on his hands an entirely natural

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madness is voluntary, then the same must be true of the sins committed while in this state. And of course if these sins are voluntary they can be justly punished. But in what sense, we might wonder, is this madness (and the sins committed while in its grip) ‘voluntary’? It would be a tall order to give a satisfactory response to this question, I think, especially since Leibniz paints this madness as being much more severe than any that is suffered by the insane in normal life. In all probability, Leibniz would have to say that the wicked are not truly seized by madness in the afterlife, but that their frenzied state is in some respects not unlike madness although it still leaves them free.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

mechanism for the punishment of the wicked, such that their sins lead naturally, without any divine intervention whatsoever, to their own punishments. There is a sort of bleak elegance to this idea, as it shows that the wicked will be the authors of their own future misfortune simply through the natural psychological processes which will occur in them after death. In the psychology of the damned, then, Leibniz not only has an explanation for the eternal recidivism of the wicked, but also a process whereby the sins of the wicked lead, naturally and mechanically, to their own punishment. The identification of such a process is an important one for Leibniz, as it is required by his doctrine of ‘natural retribution,’ which holds that all sins naturally or mechanically lead to their own punishment: ‘sins carry their punishment with them by the order of nature, and by virtue of the mechanical structure of things itself’ (G VI, 622/P 193, cf. Gr 374/SLT 207; Gr 581/SLT 169; G VI, 142/H 162; G VI, 605/P 202).<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, the psychology of the damned is an excellent example of how sins naturally cause their own punishment, and as it happens it is the only such example that can be found in Leibniz’s work.

Whether Leibniz continued to accept the psychology of the damned, and all that is bound up with it, is unclear. In the *Theodicy*, written almost 40 years after the *Philosopher’s Confession*, Leibniz returns to the idea of the damned going mad with anger in the afterlife, after finding a similar theory expressed in the work of William King, and says ‘I have sometimes had the like [ideas] myself, but I am far from

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<sup>20</sup> Leibniz also holds that virtue naturally generates its own reward; for details of how the process is supposed to work, see Laurence Carlin, ‘Reward and punishment in the best possible world: Leibniz’s theory of natural retribution’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 40 (2002): 140-3, and Lloyd Strickland, *Leibniz Reinterpreted* (London: Continuum, 2006), 30-1, and 33-6.

passing final judgement on them' (G VI, 436/H 441).<sup>21</sup> This admission of uncertainty may well be genuine, as Leibniz sometimes claimed that there can be no certainty on the matter of what happens to the soul between the times of death and resurrection, as revelation has not spoken clearly of it (cf. A I, 18, 390). This would surely apply to

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<sup>21</sup> King's theory that the damned are ultimately driven to a permanent state of madness is outlined in William King, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* (London, 1781, 5<sup>th</sup> edition) 409-24; the first edition of this work was published in 1702. King's theory holds that the damned take delight in opposing themselves to God and thus do all they can to strive against him. In doing so, they choose 'absurd and impossible things' and so are 'always frustrated' (King, op. cit. 418), yet they never realize that their frustration is caused by their own perverse choices (ibid., 416, 418f). Consequently the damned 'become more desperate by disappointments' and 'multiply their misery by new attempts, which prove no less unhappy' (ibid. 419). According to King, it is the fact that the damned always sin in the afterlife, by always being hostile towards God, that renders them susceptible to eternal punishment (ibid. 419); moreover, their punishment is the torment caused by their madness and frustration (ibid. 423). As this madness and frustration is itself directly caused by their futile hostility towards God, King holds that the sins of the damned are punished via natural means, 'for every natural action has re-action joined with it' (ibid. p409), which means that evils are punished by 'the laws of mechanism' (ibid.). The parallels between these claims, and those made by Leibniz up to thirty years earlier, makes it tempting to suppose that King borrowed them from Leibniz. However it is doubtful that King would have had an opportunity to do so, as Leibniz's ideas are to be found in texts which King almost certainly would not have had access to, i.e. writings such as the *Philosopher's Confession*, not published until 1915 (see CP xvi), and various letters which were not circulated beyond Leibniz's own circle, of which King was not a part. It is therefore likely that Leibniz and King developed their own theories independently, and the remarkable similarity between them may well just be an example of what Stuart Brown has called 'convergence', whereby those 'who share what may loosely be called a common philosophical culture will sometimes arrive independently at strikingly similar conclusions to their thinking.' See Stuart Brown, 'Leibniz and More's Cabbalistic circle' in *Henry More (1614-1687) Tercentenary Studies*, edited by Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990) 91.

what happens to the soul after the resurrection too. Nevertheless, Leibniz is prepared to state in the *Theodicy* that

there is always in the man who sins, even when he is damned, a freedom which renders him culpable, and a power, albeit remote, of recovering himself, even though it should never pass into action. (G VI, 277/H 292)

In the *Theodicy*, however, Leibniz does not reveal the source of his confidence that the wicked do not recover themselves in the afterlife. I suspect that he continued to believe that eternal recidivism of the wicked was due to what I have called the psychology of the damned, i.e. the slide into perpetual madness and sin caused by their own wickedness. My reasons for suspecting this are twofold. First, Leibniz offered no alternative explanation for the eternal recidivism of the damned. Second, the psychology of the damned ties in neatly with Leibniz's doctrine of natural retribution, as we have seen. If we suppose he ceased to believe the psychology of the damned in later life, it is difficult to see how he could have been so confident in asserting that sins naturally lead to their own punishment, which he repeatedly did in later life.<sup>22</sup> Although I think Leibniz did continue to accept the psychology of the damned, I also think that he did not hold it dogmatically. What Leibniz no doubt did

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<sup>22</sup> Laurence Carlin, who has investigated Leibniz's theory of natural retribution in some detail, rightly notes that when asserting that sins punish themselves by a natural mechanism, Leibniz does not say what this mechanism is. After trying without success to identify this mechanism, Carlin concludes that 'there does not seem to be any obvious metaphysical connection between vice and punishment in Leibniz's scheme of things.' Carlin, *op. cit.*, 145. Unfortunately in reaching this conclusion Carlin overlooks the psychology of the damned, which constitutes one way in which vice can be punished naturally and mechanically.



was accept the doctrine of eternal punishment on scriptural authority<sup>23</sup> and then fill in the rest of the details as best he could philosophically. By applying reason to the matter he came to believe that the only way there could be eternal punishment is if the wicked always sin (which in turn also justifies such punishment). With that in place, he then needed to concoct some theory which would explain why the wicked always sin. The theory he came up with is not especially compelling, but then the same can be said of all such attempts to combine a morally dynamic afterlife with the doctrine of eternal punishment.

### III

Whatever doubts we may have about the quality of the arguments Leibniz used to support the doctrine of eternal punishment, it is now clear that he did endorse it. But the extent of his commitment is still not clear; indeed, his commitment would at best be surface deep if it could be shown that the doctrine sits uneasily alongside some of his other philosophical views. So in this section we need to ascertain how the doctrine of eternal punishment fits into his philosophical system as a whole, specifically his theodicy.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the chief plank of a successful theodicy was widely assumed to be a demonstration (or at least plausible grounds for believing) that the total sum of evil in the world was exceeded by the total sum of good, for it was thought that only if

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<sup>23</sup> The principal Scriptural references used to support the doctrine of eternal punishment are Matthew 25:31-46, which refers to ‘everlasting fire’ and ‘everlasting punishment,’ and Revelation 20:10, which refers to torments lasting ‘for ever and ever.’ See also Matthew 5:29, 8:12, 10:28, 13:42, 2 Thessalonians 1:8, Revelation 14:11, Revelation 21:8 *inter alia*.

the world contained more good than evil could God's decision to create it be justified. However, efforts to show that good exceeds evil were hampered not by the doctrine of eternal punishment per se, but rather the traditional belief, still widespread in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that damnation was to be the fate of the majority, even the vast majority of mankind. Such a belief was widely considered as being an awkward barrier to the formation of a successful theodicy because of its implication that there will be more evil than good in the universe. Leibniz was acutely aware of this problem, remarking in his *Theodicy* that

it appears strange that, even in the great future of eternity, evil should have the advantage over good, under the supreme authority of him who is the sovereign good, since there will be many that are called and few that are chosen or are saved. (G VI, 111/H 132)

Leibniz has at his disposal two solutions to this problem, one exoteric, the other esoteric. The former is his claim, made in the *Theodicy*, that

it is possible, and even a very reasonable thing, that the glory and the perfection of the blessed may be incomparably greater than the misery and imperfection of the damned, and that here the excellence of the total good in the smaller number may exceed the total evil which is in the greater number. The blessed draw near to divinity through a divine Mediator, so far as can belong to these created beings, and make such progress in good as is impossible for the damned to make in evil, even though they should approach as nearly as may be the nature

of demons. God is infinite, and the devil is finite; good can and does go on *ad infinitum*, whereas evil has its bounds. (G VI, 378/H 379, cf. G VI, 47/H 70-1)

It would be hard to disagree with D. P. Walker's assessment that this offers an 'ingenious solution' to the problem of how worldly good could exceed worldly evil given the assumption that most of its rational inhabitants will be damned.<sup>24</sup> Yet Leibniz's attitude towards this response is unclear. It does not appear in his work prior to the *Theodicy*, to the best of my knowledge anyway, and may have been poached from Anne Conway expressly to solve the problem in question in a way that he considered likely to meet with general approval.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, there is nothing in Leibniz's response which is at odds with any of his other philosophical doctrines, and so he could have adopted it without difficulty at any point in his career. I see no reason to doubt that he did accept it.

But I suspect that when faced with the problem of how worldly good could exceed worldly evil when most of its rational inhabitants will be damned, Leibniz's personal (esoteric) preference was to deny that most of the world's rational inhabitants will be damned. Although Leibniz never denied this explicitly, he did leave enough clues for us to suspect that he was privately sympathetic to such a manoeuvre. At the very least, his public remarks suggest that he did not believe that the proportion of damned to saved was anywhere near as high as was popularly believed. He certainly did not believe, like so many of his contemporaries, that salvation was restricted to those of a

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<sup>24</sup> Walker, op. cit., 37.

<sup>25</sup> Conway writes 'nothing can be Evil *ad infinitum*, although it may become more and more Good *ad infinitum*: And so indeed, in the very Nature of Things, there are limits or bounds to evil; but none unto Good.' Anne Conway, *The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (London, 1692) 85.

particular confession or even of a particular religion. For example, in the autumn of 1690, Leibniz tried to convince Paul Pellisson-Fontanier, court historian of Louis XIV, that ‘one can be saved in all religions, provided that one truly loves God above all things with a love of friendship based on his infinite perfections’ (A I, 6, 78-9, cf. A I, 13, 398).<sup>26</sup> Later in 1690, in a (draft) letter to his Catholic correspondent Landgrave Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, Leibniz suggests that not all non-Christians will be damned:

I could not believe that all those who have not known Jesus Christ according to the Gospel preached in the world will be lost without resource no matter how they have lived. One could not prevent oneself from thinking this unjust, and one could not escape from that view by saying with Mr Arnauld that we should not judge God by the ideas that we have of justice. For when it is said that God is just it must be the case that we have a general idea or notion of justice, otherwise it would be to attribute to him just a word. (A I, 6, 108)

A slightly different view emerges in other texts such as the *New Essays* (A VI, 6, 502/NE 502; A VI, 6, 510/NE 510) and the *Theodicy* (G VI, 155/H 175-6; G VI, 455/S 138),<sup>27</sup> namely that God may grant to non-Christians with a good will the necessary grace for salvation (the grace possibly being granted, Leibniz speculates, at

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<sup>26</sup> Leibniz even drew up a short document for Pellisson containing quotations from respected Catholic thinkers who had also endorsed the view that salvation could be found *extra ecclesia*; see A I, 6, 82-3. Curiously, in this document Leibniz neglects to mention perhaps the most famous proponent of this view – Aquinas. See Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles* IV.93.

<sup>27</sup> See also a text from either 1699 or 1703: Gr 484/SLT 101.

the point of death). Elsewhere, Leibniz also removes unbaptized infants from the threat of damnation:

I am entirely persuaded that it would do harm to his [i.e. God's] justice to believe, for example, that children who die without being baptised, and men living morally who have never heard of Jesus Christ, are damned eternally for that. (Gr 501, cf. K III, 305; G VI, 285/H 300)<sup>28</sup>

Leibniz thus deduces from the nature of God's justice that damnation will not be the ultimate fate of any Christian who loves God, of pagans who have a good will, or of unbaptized infants.<sup>29</sup> It ought to be stressed that this is as far as Leibniz goes, and he does not conclude from the nature of God's justice that *no one* will be damned.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In at least one text Leibniz appears in favour of unbaptized infants being sent to limbo rather than hell (see A VI, 4, 2453). In limbo they would not be subject to any punishment, but would be denied the beatific vision granted to the blessed. When discussing limbo in the *Theodicy*, however, Leibniz appears non-committal (see G VI, 153/H 173), thus leaving it an open question whether he believes such infants are saved instead.

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion of Leibniz's views in this area, see Adams, op. cit., 531-6.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Becco evidently thinks that Leibniz *does* infer from God's justice that no one will be damned, as she claims that 'Leibniz finds himself profoundly in agreement with van Helmont [Francis Mercury van Helmont, advocate of universal salvation] in denying the existence of hell, which clashes with his conception of divine justice' (Becco, op. cit., 134). Becco does not provide any evidence for this claim, which not only lacks any textual basis but is also neatly undermined by Leibniz's remark in the *Theodicy* that it is *on account of* God's justice that the damned are punished (cf. G VI, 142/H 162). Leibniz thus does not see any clash between God's justice and damnation *per se*, only between God's justice and the damnation of certain groups of people, such as virtuous pagans and unbaptized infants.

Nevertheless, the upshot of excluding certain groups of people from damnation is that Leibniz is able to say that the number of the damned is likely to be considerably less than many suppose it to be, though he does not go so far as to say that the number of the saved exceeds that of the damned in spite of the fact that he probably did believe this to be so; certainly in the *Theodicy*, he balks at the suggestion that the number of the damned will exceed the number of the saved (cf. G VI, 273/H 288),<sup>31</sup> and in the Latin appendix, *Causa Dei*, he hints at his belief that the majority of humans will not be damned (cf. G VI, 456/S 139). If this is indeed his view, then Leibniz is in a strong position to say that there is more good than evil in the world as a whole, which as I have already noted was widely considered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to be cornerstone of a successful theodicy.

But this result is not enough for Leibniz, who holds of course that God created not just a world in which good exceeds evil, but in fact the best of all possible worlds. This commitment leaves him with the awkward task of explaining how a world in which even the minority of rational creatures are damned can be the best. Andrew Carlson has suggested that it cannot obviously be done. He describes first of all a world in which eventually all rational beings, including Satan, are saved, and then states, apparently on Leibniz's behalf, that 'we can be certain God at least creates the world that approaches the world just described as closely as possible.' Why? Because Leibniz's God is committed to making the best possible world, 'and surely a world in which sin and suffering are ultimately eradicated will be the best, should such a world

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In fact Leibniz even goes so far as to say that 'The damnation of an innocent man...is not possible for God.' (A VI, 4, 1453/SLT 107)

<sup>31</sup> In the *Theodicy* Leibniz occasionally grants for the sake of argument that the number of the damned is greater than the number of the saved, but only grudgingly, e.g. G VI, 113/H 134.

be possible.<sup>32</sup> It is tempting to think that Carlson must be right about this, not least because Leibniz considers punishments – all punishments – to be a source of evil, specifically physical evil (i.e. pain and suffering).<sup>33</sup> As such, eternal punishment would seem to detract from the perfection of the world, and in turn threaten its supremacy as the best, for a world lacking this evil would *prima facie* seem to be a better one.

Leibniz's replies to this charge vary in their degrees of sophistication. At times he is happy merely to deny that a possible world in which all are saved would be better than our world. He reaches this view 'from the outcome,' so to speak; that is, by inferring from the (non-negotiable) claims that our world is the best world, and that in our world not all men are saved, that worlds in which all men are saved would not be better than our world:

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<sup>32</sup> Carlson, *op. cit.*, 643. Carlson rather spoils this interesting point by also attempting to discern, albeit tentatively, evidence of Leibniz's support for universal salvation in 'On the ultimate origination of things' (1697), a text which neither mentions nor concerns salvation, damnation or the afterlife. The passage which Carlson has in mind is this one: 'Furthermore, it must be recognized that there is a perpetual and most free progress of the whole universe towards a consummation of the universal beauty and perfection of the works of God, so that it is always advancing towards greater cultivation' (G VII, 308/SLT 38). In (tentatively) identifying support for universal salvation in this passage, Carlson mistakenly conflates the ideas of progress and universal salvation, which are by no means the same thing for Leibniz (Allison Coudert makes exactly the same mistake with this text; see Coudert, *Kabbalah*, 131ff). For much more plausible interpretations of what Leibniz meant by 'progress' in 'On the ultimate origination of things', see Catherine Wilson, *Leibniz's Metaphysics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 291, and Strickland, *Leibniz Reinterpreted*, 120.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. G VI, 266/H 281; G VI, 275/H 290; G VI, 443/S 120.

And so it must be established whether it was indeed possible for all men to be saved, and the fall of Adam prevented, but that has not happened, because God, according to the nature of his wisdom, has willed to choose the most perfect out of the infinite series of possibles. But the nature of possible things makes it so that that series which contains an Adam who does not fall, and in which all men are saved, is not the most perfect; I judge this to be so from the outcome, since such a series was not chosen. (Gr 340-1)

Such reasoning is not especially satisfying, void as it is of any explanation as to why a world lacking eternal punishment should be worse than one which contains it.

A slightly more illuminating response to the problem of squaring the reality of eternal punishment with the claim that God has produced the best possible world emerges from Leibniz's oft-made assertion that the only evil permitted by God is that which is either a prerequisite to or a consequence of a greater good (Cf. A I ,16, 162/SLT 197; Gr 66/SLT 207; G VI, 109/H 129; G VI, 181/H 200; G VI, 444/S 121; G III, 558/SLT 208). Given that punishments are an evil, Leibniz would appear to be logically committed to the conclusion that punishments, even eternal ones, are somehow connected to a greater good and thus enhance the overall perfection of the world rather than detract from it. And this is a sentiment which he is only too happy to affirm:

Those who are punished are not the ones who impede the perfection of things, for, to put it briefly, that is impossible, but the ones who do not prevent the perfection of things from being impeded. These people by their own punishment contribute to the perfection of things. (GW 18)



The context of this remark, which is part of a paragraph on God's direction of the universe, suggests that Leibniz is thinking of eternal punishment here. But this raises the question: how does eternal punishment contribute to the perfection of the world? Or to put it another way, what is the greater good to which it is connected? One might expect Leibniz to want to remain agnostic on this question, as he frequently says that it is impossible for humans, who never see the full picture, to identify the greater good connected to *any* instance of evil (cf. Gr 366/AG 115; Gr 66/SLT 207; G VI, 196/H 214). But in the case of the evil of eternal punishment, Leibniz is able to provide a more specific answer, though the parts which comprise it are never properly assembled. To see what the answer is, we first need to understand Leibniz's view of vindictive (or avenging) justice, which is a kind of justice concerned neither with amending the sinner nor with setting an example for others, but which rather (according to Leibniz) 'has its foundation only in the fitness of things, which demands a certain satisfaction for the expiation of an evil action.' (G VI, 141/H 161) The 'satisfaction' Leibniz speaks of here is punishment appropriate for the offence: the aim of vindictive justice is to achieve a balance between the harm done by the sinner and the harm done to him by the punishment. (And Leibniz tells us that it is on account of God's vindictive justice that 'the pains of the damned continue, even when they no longer serve to turn them away from evil,' G VI, 142/H 162) Such appropriate punishment, he thinks, will restore the harmony or order which is upset by a crime or sin. But there is another kind of satisfaction involved in Leibniz's view of vindictive justice, which is the satisfaction he thinks a wise man feels when observing the just punishment of a criminal: such a punishment '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.’ (G VI, 141/H 161-2, cf. Gr 881/SLT 155) Hence Leibniz holds that observing a wrongdoer receiving a just punishment is a source of pleasure for the wise, apparently in some quasi-aesthetic way. Now in Leibniz’s philosophy, any enduring pleasure produces happiness (cf. Gr 579/SLT 167); moreover, Leibniz considers happiness to be a kind of perfection (physical perfection, cf. G VI, 242/H 258). From this it would seem to follow that, for Leibniz, eternal punishment *contributes to* the (physical) perfection of the universe (which accords with his statement, considered earlier, that ‘Those who are punished...by their own punishment contribute to the perfection of things’).

What Leibniz has on his hands here is a variation of a particular justification for eternal punishment known as the abominable fancy, which holds that some of the pleasure experienced by the blessed in heaven is derived from seeing or contemplating the torments of the damned in hell. Although Leibniz could not and would not accept that the blessed take pleasure in the torments of the damned, he could and probably did accept that the blessed derive some pleasure from the knowledge that the damned are being inflicted with a just punishment, and that this pleasure contributes to the perfection of the universe. Although he never says this outright, I suspect that this was indeed his view; in fact I cannot see how he could have denied it, given his views that the wicked are justly punished throughout eternity, that the observation of just punishment is a source of pleasure for the wise, and that pleasure is a kind of perfection. However by the 17<sup>th</sup> century it had become unfashionable to justify eternal punishment via the abominable fancy,<sup>34</sup> and this may have made Leibniz wary of promoting his own version of it. At any rate, we can now see how Leibniz is able to say that eternal punishment is connected with a greater

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Walker, *op. cit.*, 29ff.

good, and thus how he is able to square his affirmation of eternal punishment with his claim that God has produced the best of all possible worlds.

We now need to summarize our findings thus far. We have seen that Leibniz establishes and justifies the doctrine of eternal punishment in numerous texts written throughout his career. His central claim is that such punishment is established and justified by the eternal recidivism of the wicked. Moreover, Leibniz supports this claim by what I have termed the psychology of the damned, which is an entirely natural mechanism showing how those who are wicked at the time of death will ultimately go mad in the afterlife, this madness causing them to stay wicked and so deserving of eternal punishment. We have also seen that Leibniz puts forward arguments to square the doctrine of eternal punishment with his project of theodicy. So to answer the question raised at the beginning of this paper, that of whether Leibniz supported or rejected the doctrine of eternal punishment, I submit that the most plausible interpretation of all the material examined in sections 1 – 3 is that Leibniz was a lifelong supporter of this doctrine. But while the evidence shows that Leibniz was orthodox insofar as he was a believer in eternal punishment, our survey has revealed that the *way* in which Leibniz arrived at and defended this belief was anything but orthodox. Rather than accept an ‘off the shelf’ package of arguments and theories to ground his belief, Leibniz developed his own. What emerges from it is an endorsement of eternal punishment with many distinctly Leibnizian features, such as the psychology of the damned and a variation of the abominable fancy. Given the various unorthodox and original arguments and theories Leibniz drew on in his endorsement of eternal punishment, I think it is safe to say that Lewis White Beck errs

when he casually refers to Leibniz's 'bland acceptance of the eternity of punishment.'<sup>35</sup>

We turn now to two projects from late in Leibniz's career which, it has been suggested, are able to undermine the conclusion that Leibniz was a lifelong supporter of eternal punishment.

#### IV.

We shall begin with Leibniz's plan to reprint a book by Ernst Soner entitled *Demonstratio Theologica et Philosophica, quod aeterna impiorum supplicia non arguant Dei justitiam, sed injustitiam* [*A Theological and Philosophical Demonstration that the Eternal Punishments of the Impious do not Prove the Justice of God but His Injustice*] (1603). This plan, which was Leibniz's own, ultimately came to nothing, although in 1708 it was sufficiently well advanced for Leibniz to prepare a critical preface, which we shall examine in a moment. The central argument of Soner's book is that God would not be just if he were to inflict an infinite punishment for finite sin, and since God is just, he will therefore not mete out eternal punishment. The crux of Soner's argument is his claim that human sin is only ever finite, and it is this claim which Leibniz addresses in his preface.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969) 235.

<sup>36</sup> I translate from the Latin transcription in Lessing's essay 'Leibniz von den Ewigen Strafen,' from volume 7 of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke* (Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1976) 175-6. Lessing's transcription follows the original manuscript held in Wolfenbüttel. There also exists a draft of this preface, held in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek in Hanover under the signature LH 1, 20, Bl. 194. There are three significant differences between the draft and the fair copy published by Lessing,

This demonstration by Ernst Soner, once a very distinguished philosopher in Altdorf, which he called a theological etc. demonstration of the injustice of eternal punishments, is praised by some as irrefutable. And it is all the more harmful because few have seen it, for people are generally accustomed to put a high value on that which they do not know. I therefore think that it is often useful to publish such things, as just reading them is sufficient to refute and overthrow this opinion which has been received among people for a long time. It certainly cannot be denied that Soner wrote in a subtle and ingenious way, but his demonstration [of the injustice of eternal punishment] still suffers from a major omission which is worthwhile pointing out lest an incautious reader should be deceived by the speciousness of his argument, the essence of which comes down to this: sins are finite, there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite,<sup>37</sup> therefore punishments must also be finite. Moreover, he attempts to show that sins are finite by rejecting the senses in which they can be understood as infinite, which he enumerates in these words: ‘If the sins of the impious are infinite or are able to be considered as such, then they obtain this infinite degree either from themselves or from the one who commits them, or from the one against whom they are committed, or from some of these reasons or from all of them simultaneously. But they cannot be infinite, or be considered as such, in any of these senses. And yet apart from these, there is no other sense

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and I record these differences in the notes below. I would like to thank the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek for their kind permission in allowing me to publish my translations of portions of this manuscript.

<sup>37</sup> In the draft, Leibniz added here: ‘but there must be proportion between sins and punishments.’

in which they can actually be or be said to be infinite. Therefore they are not infinite at all.’

What the theologians usually say in response to this argument, which they attack on the basis of the proportion between sins and punishments, may be read with profit in their own works. At this point, however, I would prefer to expose another flaw in Soner’s argument, namely his incomplete list of the senses in which something can be called infinite. For sins can be called infinite not only with regard to the object against which they are committed, namely God, or with regard to the kind of sin or its degree of intensity, and the other senses mentioned by the author, but also with regard to their number. So even if we should concede that no sin is infinite in itself, it can still be said that the sins of the damned are infinite in number,<sup>38</sup> because they persist in sin throughout all eternity. Therefore if sins are eternal, it is just that the punishments should be eternal too. Of course evil men damn themselves, as the wise rightly say, since they are forever impenitent and turn away from God. Given this, God cannot be deemed severe, as if his punishment was disproportionate to the sin.<sup>39</sup>

This is the whole of Leibniz’s preface. One certainly does not get the impression upon reading this piece that Leibniz is being insincere, or putting up token resistance to Soner’s argument. Indeed, what Leibniz says in the preface accords perfectly with

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<sup>38</sup> In the draft, Leibniz crossed out ‘it can still be said that the sins of the damned are infinite in number,’ in favour of: ‘the sins of a damned man or angel are still in fact infinite, not indeed in magnitude, but in number.’

<sup>39</sup> In the draft of this preface, Leibniz crossed out ‘Given this, God cannot be deemed severe, as if his punishment was disproportionate to the sin,’ in favour of: ‘And so neither the divine goodness nor the divine justice can be injured by such an eternity of punishment.’

what he says in many other works, as we have seen. But then it is not the contents of this text which have been cited as evidence of Leibniz's disbelief in eternal punishment, but rather the fact that Leibniz wanted to reprint Soner's book in the first place. Catherine Wilson writes: 'In the cat-and-mouse game of seventeenth-century publishing, this remark [about wanting to republish Soner's book] would tend to establish that he was actually in sympathy with Soner's position and wanted to give it a hearing while protecting himself.'<sup>40</sup> Wilson continues to claim that Leibniz 'was a strong proponent of censorship for dangerous books' and that therefore 'he would probably not have re-issued a work whose conclusions he found abhorrent, even with an attached refutation.'<sup>41</sup> Could it be, then, that Leibniz's aim in reprinting Soner's book was to circulate a work with which he was actually in agreement? Siding with this view obviously involves disregarding Leibniz's stated explanation for wanting to reprint Soner's book, namely that by doing so he hoped to destroy the reputation of a book few people had actually read. I would not be surprised if this explanation does not come across as entirely convincing. Wilson's alternative explanation will, I am sure, appear more compelling, not least because the human mind often finds thoughts of hidden agendas and secret sympathies difficult ones to dispel. But such thoughts can, in this case, be dispelled easily enough. To do so, we need only consider a set of private notes Leibniz made in 1709 or 1710 on a book by Christoph Stegmann, entitled *On the Unitarian Metaphysics*. Stegmann's book concerns Socinian metaphysics, and in it he denies that God is omnipresent, incorporeal, and infinite, and also that there are immaterial substances. In his notes on Stegmann's book, Leibniz was, as anyone acquainted with Leibniz's philosophy might suspect, deeply

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<sup>40</sup> Wilson, 'The reception of Leibniz in the eighteenth century', 460.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, op. cit., 473 n51.

critical of all these views. What is of interest to us, however, is not Leibniz's critique in these notes, but rather a passage in which Leibniz recalls his having written critical remarks on Stegmann's views as a young man. Leibniz tells us that

when, during a recent examination of old papers, I came across these criticisms of mine of Stegmann's metaphysics, I thought that, once revised, they might be usefully published together with the author's own book. I had no fear that it would be harmful, especially when accompanied by this antidote, which I thought would not only break the force of this poison but also act as a remedy.<sup>42</sup>

What this passage tells us is that Leibniz did not have to be sympathetic to the ideas of others in order to want to reprint their work. The fact that Leibniz reveals this in private notes allows us to be confident that it is his real view, for there is no compelling reason to suppose that Leibniz sought to mask his real views when composing papers for his own use. Indeed, it is difficult to see what he could have hoped to achieve by doing so. But then the fact that Leibniz did approve of reprinting the work of those with whom he disagreed, provided that his own 'corrections' were included with it, ought not to surprise anyone familiar with his *modus operandi*. For it must be remembered that very often what prompted Leibniz to reveal his views publicly was the desire to respond to the errors he perceived in the work of others; in fact, the majority of Leibniz's published work, or work intended for publication, was

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<sup>42</sup> 'Ad Christophori Stegmanni Metaphysicam Unitariorum' (1709-1710). I quote from the English translation of this text in Nicholas Jolley, *Leibniz and Locke: A Study of the New Essays on Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 195.



designed to ‘correct’ these errors. Reprinting someone else’s work, along with his own corrections, is a natural extension of this.

Returning, then, to the point at hand, it seems to me that if we accept that Leibniz had no ulterior motive in wanting to reprint Stegmann’s book, and I can see no reason not to accept this, then we should also accept that Leibniz had no ulterior motive in wanting to reprint Soner’s book. There is simply no difference between the two cases significant enough to serve as grounds for suspecting a secret motive in one case but not the other. The only way to establish with any plausibility that Leibniz did have such a motive with the Soner book, and that this motive was his sympathy with Soner’s position, is to find other (roughly) contemporaneous texts which show Leibniz either casting doubt on the doctrine of eternal punishment, or expressing support for a rival doctrine.

## V.

According to Allison Coudert, Leibniz *did* support the rival doctrine of universal salvation in the last two decades or so of his life, and in her view the best evidence for this can be found in another of Leibniz’s projects, to which we now turn. The project in question is an epic poem entitled *Uranias*, which Leibniz conceived as a vehicle for Johann Wilhelm Petersen, one-time superintendent of Lüneburg and ardent supporter of millenarianism (chiliasm) and universal salvation. The first we hear of this poem is in a draft reply Leibniz wrote on the back of a letter from Petersen dated 15 October 1706. In this draft reply, Leibniz floats the idea of the *Uranias* poem and also gives a brief sketch of it, from which it is clear that Leibniz proposed universal salvation

(trading under the name of ‘the restitution of things’ following Acts 3:21) as one of the topics to be treated by Petersen. This is the reply in full:

I, who am often accustomed to think about how the talents of great men might be put to the best use, have seen that you are able to accomplish what I have often wished for – a fit work about heavenly things in the form of an epic poem. For although theology shines forth in prose, it would be even more sublime if clothed in Virgilian majesty, which you alone, out of everyone, could do best. The substance of such a work would be thus: first, God, sufficient in his secret and perpetual eternity, then cosmogony, then the economy of providence in the government of things. But the second part of the work should be about future matters, whether they pertain to bodies or souls or any other things, and here it should be about the purification of souls and the restitution of things, or rather their gradual improvement and elevation. I would like that the last but not least part of the work be devoted to the grandeur of the celestial kingdom, or, as I shall call it, the divine court. There the extraordinary virtues of the angels should be depicted in vivid colours, and the happiness of blessed souls celebrated: to them, innumerable worlds are exhibited, not just the world under our feet; and as they see for all time the different scenes of divine wisdom and goodness, their love and veneration for the supreme mind grows more and more. Here is the holy place for the most elegant fictions, although the truth surpasses anything we can imagine, no matter how beautiful. But aside from you, with your divinely inspired power of expression, and your insight into the inner recesses of divine matters, I know of no one from whom such a work could be hoped for. (HD 25-6)

Allison Coudert claims that this outline ‘so clearly indicates that by this date [i.e. 1706] Leibniz fully accepted the doctrine of universal salvation, even though he was unwilling to advocate it publicly.’<sup>43</sup> I shall reserve judgement on this for the moment.

Now as it happens, Michel Fichant, who was the first to publish the above letter, expresses doubt that it was actually sent to Petersen in 1706, and suggests that it may not have been until 3 September 1711 that Leibniz finally approached Petersen with the plan for the *Uranias* poem (see HD 27). He did so, it seems, by sending the following plan of the poem to a mutual friend, Johann Fabricius:

It [*Uranias*] would have to begin with cosmogony and paradise, which would be the subject of the first book, or even the first and second. The third, fourth and fifth, if it were thought fit, would relate the fall of Adam and redemption of mankind through Christ, and touch on the history of the church. Then I would readily allow the poet to give in the sixth book a description of the millennial reign, and to depict in the seventh the anti-Christ invading with Gog and Magog, and finally overthrown by a breath from the divine mouth. In the eighth we would have the day of judgement and the punishments of the damned; in the ninth, tenth and eleventh, the happiness of the blessed, the grandeur and beauty of the City of God and of the abode of the blessed, and excursions through the immense spaces of the universe to illuminate the wonderful works of God; one would also add a description of the heavenly palace itself. The twelfth would

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<sup>43</sup> Coudert, op. cit., 116. Coudert’s view has won at least one convert; see Marcia Keith Scuchard, ‘Leibniz, Benzeliuss, and Swedenborg’, in *Leibniz, Mysticism and Religion*, edited by Allison P. Coudert, Richard H. Popkin and Gordon M. Weiner (Kluwer: Dordrecht, 1998) 99.

end everything with the restitution of all things, that is, with the evil themselves reformed and restored to happiness and to God, with God henceforth operating all in all without exception. Here and there one might engage in a more sublime philosophy mixed with mystical theology, where the origin of things would be treated in the manner of Lucretius, Vida and Fracastor. A poet would be forgiven for things which would be harder to tolerate from a dogmatic theologian. Such a work would make its author immortal and could be wonderfully useful for moving the souls of men to hope for a better state and for lighting the sparks of a more genuine piety. (D 5, 293-4)<sup>44</sup>

Had Coudert discussed this letter, no doubt she would have drawn the same conclusion from it as she did from Leibniz's earlier sketch of *Uranias*, namely that it constitutes clear evidence that Leibniz endorsed universal salvation. As far as I can determine, however, neither the 1706 sketch nor the 1711 letter contain any positive evidence that Leibniz did support that doctrine. Coudert's reasoning, it seems to me, is that the evidence comes from the fact that Leibniz wanted universal salvation to be

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<sup>44</sup> Petersen began working on *Uranias* after receiving this plan, and three months later Leibniz was surprised to learn that Petersen had finished it. Concerned that Petersen may have composed it in undue haste, Leibniz asked to see the poem prior to publication. His fears proved to be well founded, as he discovered the work to have numerous faults, in grammar, style and content (cf. D 5, 295-6). Leibniz decided to revise the poem himself and worked on it off and on until 1715, though he made no corrections or changes to the final book (on universal salvation; see D 5, 297). The poem was finally published in 1720, 4 years after Leibniz's death, as *Uranias qua opera Dei magna omnibus retro seculis et oeconomis transactis usque ad apocatastin seculorum omnium per spiritum primogeniti gloriosissime consumanda carmine heroico celebrantur*. It was credited solely to Petersen.

part of his projected ‘epic poem’ in the first place, i.e. that he would not have proposed its inclusion if he did not advocate the doctrine himself. But if we accept this reasoning, then we are surely obliged to accept also that Leibniz was an advocate of millenarianism, as the topics Leibniz suggests for the sixth and seventh books, namely the millennial reign and the invasion of the anti-Christ, are core doctrines of a sect of Christianity called millenarianism (or chialism). Yet there is solid evidence from elsewhere to suggest that he was not a millenarianist.<sup>45</sup> The upshot is that Coudert’s reasoning is faulty: just because Leibniz suggested that particular ideas or doctrines feature in his epic poem, it does not follow that he personally subscribed to them. To clinch the point, in a letter to Fabricius of 10 March 1712, Leibniz explains that the last book of the proposed poem, on universal salvation, ‘deals with an opinion which I do not condemn at all, but which I am not willing to make my own’ (D 5, 297). Coudert overlooks this remark. Quite why she does so is unclear, but in any case Leibniz’s unambiguous denial of any personal support for the doctrine of universal salvation removes the last vestige of plausibility from Coudert’s hypothesis.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For discussions of some of this evidence, see Daniel J. Cook and Lloyd Strickland, ‘Leibniz on Millenarianism’, forthcoming in *Pluralität der Perspektiven und Einheit der Wahrheit im Werk von G. W. Leibniz*, edited by Friedrich Beiderbeck and Stephan Waldhoff (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007), and Maria Rosa Antognazza and Howard Hotson, *Alsted and Leibniz on God, the Magistrate and the Millennium* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Coudert does identify one further text which she claims is evidence of Leibniz’s support of universal salvation, namely a review that Leibniz wrote in 1701 of a book by Petersen entitled *Μυστηριον ἀποκατάστασεως πάντων* [*Mystery of the Restitution of All Things*] (Offenbach, 1700). Coudert argues that the review is evidence of Leibniz’s ‘favorable attitude towards Petersen’s theory of universal restitution [i.e. universal salvation]’, which is the central topic of Petersen’s book (Coudert, op. cit., 116). Coudert offers no reason for this assessment, which is unsurprising since nowhere in the review does Leibniz indicate that he is in favour of Petersen’s theory. Worse, at least as far as Coudert’s

So if Leibniz was not a supporter of universal salvation, why did he advocate the inclusion of the doctrine in his epic poem? D. P. Walker suggests that Leibniz's principal concern was with the 'edifying effects' of the poem, and that Leibniz may have thought the doctrine of universal salvation was 'more conducive to true piety than that of eternal torment.' Developing this idea, Walker suggests that, for Leibniz, perhaps

the exoteric, useful but untrue doctrine is universal salvation, while eternal torment is the esoteric, dangerous but true doctrine. Leibniz is ready to encourage someone else to tell a useful lie, someone for whom it is not a lie; but he is not ready to tell it himself.<sup>47</sup>

Walker's interpretation is not without merit, but it goes too far. There is certainly no evidence to support his claim that Leibniz ever considered the doctrine of eternal punishment to be a dangerous one (and of course if Leibniz did hold such a view, it is odd that he should promote this 'dangerous' doctrine very publicly in the *Theodicy*). But I think that Walker is on the right lines when he suggests that Leibniz's chief concern was with the edifying effects of the *Uranias* poem; certainly some of

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hypothesis is concerned, is that she overlooks the fact that in this review Leibniz argues *in favour of the doctrine of eternal punishment*, claiming that the sins of the wicked are 'infinite in number, and that therefore punishments can be eternal if the sins are in effect eternally repeated. For as minds or souls, and therefore the sinners with them, carry on throughout eternity, they would then be justly punished throughout eternity.' (HD 95) Thus the Petersen review offers no obvious support to the claim that Leibniz advocated the doctrine of universal salvation; if anything, it supports the assessment that Leibniz was an adherent of the eternal punishment doctrine.

<sup>47</sup> Walker, *op. cit.*, 216.

Leibniz's remarks in the second sketch of *Uranias* suggest that this is the case. Moreover, the suggestion accords with what Leibniz says elsewhere, that reason and arguments are not generally what inspire men to piety; instead, according to Leibniz, for most people 'something is needed which affects their passions and which ravishes their souls, as does music and poetry' (Gr 88-9). Quite probably, then, Leibniz's hope was that *Uranias* would reach and stir those unmoved by more rational considerations.<sup>48</sup>

I would also accept Walker's suggestion that Leibniz came to consider universal salvation a 'useful lie' to tell, although in doing so we need to be clear about the way in which Leibniz considered it to be useful. It might be tempting to think that Leibniz considered universal salvation a useful lie for those who considered the doctrine of eternal punishment a barrier to faith. However I can find no evidence to suppose that he did think this. More plausibly, he considered it useful in the very role he suggested for it, namely as the conclusion to an epic theological poem whose goal is to inspire and edify. In that context universal salvation is, as it were, the ultimate happy ending, a fitting last act in an epic cosmic drama in which good not only vanquishes evil but destroys it utterly; as such it serves as a clever poetic device quite able to uplift, promote piety, and inspire hope, irrespective of whether one believes it to be true.

## VI.

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<sup>48</sup> This view is promoted also by Maria Rosa Antagonazza and Howard Hotson, who suggest that Petersen's poetic treatment 'is far more able to arouse love of God and hope for better things' than Leibniz's own philosophical reasonings. Antagonazza and Hotson, op. cit., 198.

I think it is safe to say that none of the texts connected with the projects discussed in sections 4 and 5 is sufficient to overturn the conclusion reached at the end of section 3, namely that Leibniz was a lifelong supporter of the doctrine of eternal punishment. In fact, the text considered in section 4, namely the Soner preface, *supports* that conclusion rather than undermines it, while the texts considered in section 5 do not reveal any support for the rival doctrine of universal salvation. I therefore reiterate my conclusion that Leibniz did believe in the doctrine of eternal punishment, and did not at any time waver from this belief. However our survey has also revealed that there was some change in Leibniz's views, not from a belief in eternal punishment to a belief in universal salvation, as Coudert claims, but rather from the belief that universal salvation is a harmful doctrine to the belief that it isn't. In 1695, as we have seen, Leibniz declared that positive endorsements of universal salvation 'can be harmful since they are capable of keeping sinners in their security' (A I, 11, 21). By 1712, however, he is prepared to state that universal salvation is 'a thesis that I do not in the least condemn' (D 5, 297), which surely implies that he no longer considered it to be harmful in the way that he had before. The reason for this softening of attitude, which does not seem to have coincided with any softening in his belief that universal salvation was false, awaits scholarly attention.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> I would like to thank Daniel J. Cook and an anonymous BJHP reviewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.