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Leibniz, purgatory, and universal salvation

Many of the canonical philosophers of the modern period had little or nothing to say about the doctrine of purgatory. One exception is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716), who discussed it in a number of writings in his extensive corpus. Moreover, his treatment of the topic is far from routine. For one thing, Leibniz came to endorse the doctrine of purgatory not through either of the traditional routes—one based on the consent of the church fathers, the other on the Christian tradition of saying prayers for the dead—but by a philosophical argument of his own devising. He also developed an ingenious natural mechanism through which he believed purgatorial punishment was administered, or more accurately self-administered. Curiously, while Leibniz's views on purgatory have attracted a fair degree of scholarly interest, it is for neither of these innovations. Instead, scholars have typically been concerned with whether Leibniz endorsed the doctrine of universal salvation, and in so doing effectively reduced hell to purgatory. In order to get a well-rounded view of Leibniz's views on purgatory, it is useful to consider them alongside his views on eternal punishment, and accordingly in this paper I shall consider both. In the first section I shall sketch out the case for supposing that Leibniz endorsed both purgatory and eternal punishment, treating them as distinct outcomes for sinners depending on the scale of their sins, and in the second section I shall consider the form and mechanism of punishment involved in both. In the third section I shall consider the arguments of those who have suggested that Leibniz effectively reduced hell to purgatory by endorsing universal salvation. I shall conclude that while Leibniz stopped short of endorsing universal salvation, and thus of actually reducing hell to purgatory, there are grounds to suppose that he *hoped* the doctrine of universal salvation was true and that therefore hell would in fact reduce to purgatory.

1. Leibniz's acceptance of purgatory and hell

Let us start with Leibniz's endorsement of purgatory. On the surface it may seem surprising that he did endorse it; after all, Leibniz was a lifelong Lutheran who resisted numerous attempts by Catholic acquaintances to convert him,¹ and accordingly one might reasonably 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 written in 1692 to a Catholic correspondent, Landgrave Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels, Leibniz confides: "I personally hold that a certain temporal punishment after this life is rather reasonable and probable" (A I 7, 325).³ Lest it be thought that this is little more than a sop to the theological sensibilities of his 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 from 1700 (LGR 317), in a text written c. 1705 for his own personal use (LGR 248-9), and in a letter to the Protestant Princess Caroline of Ansbach of 1706, wherein he writes: "You will be surprised that I say, Protestant as I am, that a kind of purification, or if you will, of purgatory seems necessary for the perfection of souls" (A I 25, 445).

But while Leibniz was often happy to indicate his support for the idea of purgatory, he rarely indicated the reasons behind it. He was certainly not impressed by attempts to root the doctrine in the writings of the church fathers,⁴ often complaining that the fathers did not have a consistent position on it and tended to speak about it with hesitation (see for example LGR

¹ See, for example, A I 6, 229; A II 2 (2nd ed.), 227. Leibniz was uncomfortable with the term "Lutheran"; see A I 7, 257.

² For Luther's denial of purgatory, see Luther 1863-, XX, pt. 2, 360ff.

³ I cite a published English translation where available. Where one is not available, the translation is my own.

⁴ For a contemporaneous example of this, see Ward 1687.

308-10 and 311-15). Leibniz was also unimpressed by arguments that sought to ground the doctrine in the longstanding Christian tradition of praying for the dead,⁵ arguing that it does not necessarily follow from the practice of saying prayers for the dead that the dead are actually helped by prayers, and that in any case the practice is a natural human response and an expression of love (see for example LGR 309-10). Eschewing the traditional paths to the doctrine of purgatory, Leibniz instead appears to have reached it philosophically. Consider this passage from c.1705:

This remission of sins that delivers us from the pains of hell by virtue of the blood of Jesus Christ does not, however, prevent there still being some punishment in this life or in the other, and the one which is in store for us in the other life, and which serves 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, no sin should be left entirely unpunished. (LGR 248-9)

Thus stated, the argument is clearly incomplete and needs fleshing out. The key claim is that no sin should be left unpunished, a point Leibniz insists upon in numerous writings (see for example A VI 4, 2351; LGR 136; R 105; L 360; SLT 152; L 590; LM 276). 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 “it is evident that far too often punishments are deferred to another life” (LGR 284; see also Dutens V 391). 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 represents his argument 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.

Conclusion. Therefore some sins are punished after this life.

This argument is entirely philosophical; the heart derives from one of Leibniz's core philosophical beliefs (P1) and an empirical observation (P2). The argument itself seems to be neutral as to whether the post-mortem punishment is temporary or permanent in nature, though Leibniz uses it only to establish temporary post-mortem punishment. He offers an entirely different philosophical argument for eternal punishment, and it is to that we now turn.

In a number of writings, Leibniz defends the justice of eternal punishment by claiming that as the damned persist in sin throughout eternity, it is right that their punishment also be eternal. Hence he writes in 1708:

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, 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

⁵ The argument 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. For a contemporaneous example of this, see Pellisson-Fontanier 1686, III: 35-7.

forever impenitent and turn away from God. Given this, God cannot be deemed severe, as if his punishment was disproportionate to the sin. (LGR 326)

The same argument is to be found in Leibniz's work throughout his life, from the early 1670s (e.g. CP 81-3), through to the 1690s (e.g. LTS 104 and 111, A I 11, 21), the 1700s (HD 95, NE 96, GR 249) and the *Theodicy* of 1710 (e.g. H 205, H 290). No doubt in an effort to show that his argument was not unconventional,⁶ in the *Theodicy* Leibniz claims 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 H 291 and H 441).

In recent years, Paul Lodge has suggested that when Leibniz puts forward his argument for eternal punishment, his intention is “to provide an explanation of how the doctrine of eternal damnation is rationally compatible with belief in a perfect God,” and that “there is no indication from Leibniz regarding his own views about the truth of this particular revelation”, that is, the doctrine of eternal punishment (Lodge 2016, 308). According to Lodge, Leibniz's apparent acceptance of the doctrine may well have been motivated by his desire to be seen to toe the orthodox line, not because he was afraid of personal attacks from theologians committed to the doctrine of eternal punishment, but because deviating from the orthodox position could be dangerous. To support this reading, Lodge cites the following passage from a letter Leibniz wrote in 1695:

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. (A I 11, 21)

The implication seems to be that the doctrine of eternal punishment is not dangerous, and so is the safer one to teach. On the back of this, Lodge argues that “the fact that Leibniz offered a defence of the doctrine of eternal punishment grounded in its safety [is] reason to be sceptical with regard to the further conclusion that he was himself committed to the doctrine” (2016, 320).

Might it be, then, that Leibniz defended the doctrine of eternal punishment on the grounds Lodge suggests, and so did not really accept it himself? In order to make an assessment, we first need to understand what Leibniz means when he describes one doctrine as being “safe” or “safer” than another. As one might expect, he defines safety in terms of not bringing about danger; hence he says that the Vulgate can be “safely read” because “there is nothing in it from which danger may be able to arise to those who read it” (LGR 229). What sort of danger does Leibniz have in mind here? The danger is error, but in theological matters the danger isn't simply being wrong, it is being wrong in a way that endangers one's salvation (see for example A IV 3, 236-7, LGR 229 and 237-8, H 177). Consequently, if

⁶ A much more conventional philosophical way of justifying eternal punishment was by arguing that sins are of an infinite degree because they are committed against God, an infinite good, which makes it just that their punishment should be infinite (i.e. eternal) as well. For a contemporaneous example of this, see J. C. 1687?, 2. Interestingly, there is one text in which Leibniz justifies eternal punishment using precisely this argument; see LGR 316.

universal salvation is deemed unsafe, this is not because it might lead followers to sin, or because holding the doctrine might be wrong, but because holding the doctrine might endanger one's salvation. This is presumably what Leibniz means when he says that the doctrine is "capable of keeping sinners in their security", namely that sinners who believe in universal salvation feel that their salvation is secure even though their error is such that their salvation could in fact be in danger. Let's now work through the implications of this. In order for salvation to be meaningfully endangered, it must be possible to miss out on it altogether, and not (say) just delay its onset for a time. Presumably to miss out on it altogether would involve being condemned to eternal punishment; certainly Leibniz does not entertain any other possible outcomes.⁷ In other words, to use the language of "safety" in a theological context is to presuppose that there is such a thing as eternal punishment. Recall now Lodge's claim that "the fact that Leibniz offered a defence of the doctrine of eternal punishment grounded in its safety [is] reason to be sceptical with regard to the further conclusion that he was himself committed to the doctrine" (2016, 320). We can now see that when Leibniz defends the doctrine of eternal punishment (or indeed any other) based on its safety, he must be presupposing the reality of eternal punishment, and thereby in fact be committed to it. Of course it does not follow from this that anyone actually does undergo eternal punishment, only that God has established it as the final outcome in the event that there are those who deserve it. It is entirely consistent with this that ultimately no one deserves it, and so no one undergoes it, but of course the fact that it exists as a possible outcome means that it is part of the Christian salvation story.

Since Leibniz clearly presupposes that eternal punishment is real in the sense of being the outcome for those who deserve it, the question we should ask is whether he believed that there would be anyone who does deserve it, that is, whether he believed there would be any eternal recidivists. There is certainly evidence that he assumed there would be. For example, he writes in the mid-1690s:

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)

And similarly, in 1705:

God wills simply and in earnest that all be saved and that all use grace rightly, but he does not will with the highest degree of will, that is, to speak in a human manner, he does not will with the greatest effort. Otherwise all would in fact be saved. (GR 255)

Both of these passages come from Leibniz's private notes, which were not intended to be shared with or seen by others. This is noteworthy inasmuch as while it is possible to cast doubt on the sincerity of what he says in his published writings or those intended for circulation to others (for example, because he wanted to appear orthodox), it is much more difficult to do so with his private notes. There is, after all, no obvious reason why Leibniz

⁷ Limbo is the most obvious possible alternative outcome; traditionally, those in limbo are not punished, but they are denied the beatific vision granted to the blessed. However, limbo is usually reserved for unbaptized infants, and Leibniz understands it this way also. Moreover, he was agnostic about the idea of limbo (see H 173).

would adopt views in his private notes that he did not actually believe, as they would attract no censure or praise or scrutiny of any kind. On this basis, then, I think it likely that Leibniz did assume that some people would not be saved, and thus undergo eternal punishment. His assumption was no doubt based on deference to scripture, which contains numerous passages often used to support the doctrine of eternal punishment for the wicked.⁸

There is, then, a strong *prima facie* case that Leibniz accepted both the doctrine of purgatory and the doctrine of eternal punishment. We turn now to consider the form and mechanism of the punishment in both.

2. The Form and Mechanism of Punishment

Traditionally, both purgatory and hell have been thought of as involving fire. In the case of purgatory, this is a cleansing fire which removes one's impurities, while in the case of hell it is simply a punishment, with no cleansing effect. Leibniz does occasionally make use of the fire metaphor, but as we shall see, it is highly doubtful that he believed either form of punishment actually involved fire, or even sensations of being burned.

In an early work from 1668-9, Leibniz suggests that eternal punishment consists only in being deprived of the beatific vision: "God punishes no one otherwise than privatively, insofar as he does not bestow happiness upon them. In this way, the cruelty of eternal punishment is undermined." (LGR 33) In a slightly later text, the *Philosopher's Confession* from 1672-3, Leibniz appears to take a different view, describing how the damned are effectively tormented for all eternity by their own frustrations and hatred of the world. He explains that those who die discontented with God and the world carry their hatred with them in the afterlife, where their hatred grows stronger and stronger through 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 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. (CP 91)

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" (CP 91). The upshot is that his hatred of God and the world continues without end, as does the torment that this hatred brings.⁹ 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 that will occur in them after death.

⁸ See for example Matthew 5:29, 8:12, 10:28, 13:42, 25:31-46, Revelation 14:11, 20:10, 21:8, and 2 Thessalonians 1:8. Leibniz was certainly aware that some had challenged the scriptural basis for eternal punishment, because in 1694 he copied out passages from a book ([Anon.] 1694) which used hermeneutical analysis in an attempt to show that there was no scriptural basis for the doctrine. See the unpublished manuscript held by G. W. Leibniz Bibliothek, Hannover, under the shelfmark LH I, 5, 2, Bl. 30. An English translation is available: <http://www.leibniz-translations.com/1694notes.htm> In his own work, however, Leibniz never repeats or even mentions any of the hermeneutical analysis from this book, which suggests he was not convinced by it.

⁹ For a helpful discussion of this idea, see Horn 2015.

It is likely that Leibniz entertained a similar process operating on those in purgatory. He hints as much when he writes in a short text that cannot have been written later than spring 1698:

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. (LGR 315-16)

And when discussing purgatorial punishment in “An Examination of the Christian Religion” (1686), Leibniz describes it as the “affliction of a soul which reviews its own actions” (A VI 4, 2455). The chief difference between the process of self-punishment that occurs to those in purgatory and those undergoing eternal punishment is that while the damned die hating God and the world, those who are to be saved do not. Indeed, they are essentially good people, 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 those undergoing purgatorial punishment, that is, they will focus on their sins and moral flaws, which will torment them (since they are essentially good) and also cleanse them.

It is notable that the psychological process discussed above, which involves post-mortem punishment effectively being self-administered through normal psychological processes, is outlined only in relatively early writings (from the 1670s and 1680s). Thereafter it is not mentioned,¹⁰ leading one to wonder whether Leibniz accepted it in later life. There are certainly grounds to think that he had not entirely ruled it out, or at least something like it. For in an appendix to the *Theodicy* (1710), Leibniz outlines a similar theory of post-mortem punishment that had been advanced by William King in *De origine mali*, and ends by saying: “These thoughts are not to be despised, and I have sometimes had similar ones, though I am careful not to make a decisive judgment about them” (H 441). Yet even though the mature Leibniz was careful not to make a decisive judgment about how exactly post-mortem punishment was to be administered, he continued to believe that it would take place not through an intervention of God but through a natural process in which the sinner somehow torments himself. Thus he writes in 1712 that God has established his laws in such a way “that the wicked is heautontimorumenos [self-tormentor]” (Dutens V 389). Such a position is entirely in keeping with, and in fact flows from, Leibniz’s doctrine of the harmony of the kingdoms of nature and grace, which holds that there is a concord between God’s roles as architect of the physical universe and his role as monarch of the moral universe of minds, such that his plans for minds are effected through the order of nature. Accordingly all rewards and punishments are administered through the normal workings of nature rather than through divine interventions (see Strickland 2016).

It is worth noting one text in which Leibniz appears to offer a strikingly different view of post-mortem punishment, or at least purgatorial punishment, than that outlined above. In a letter to Princess Caroline of 1706, Leibniz suggests that for some, the purification process might be like taking a hot bath in which one is scrubbed with oil, while for others it would be like being placed in a vessel made of embers (A I 25, 445-6). The suggestions should not be taken too seriously: Leibniz’s aim in his letter is clearly to assuage Caroline’s fears about the

¹⁰ There are occasional hints of it in later writings, such as when he writes to a correspondent in 1710: “it may be said that virtue brings about its own reward, and crime its own punishment, because by a sort of natural consequence of the very last state of the soul, according as it departs expiated or unexpiated, there arises a sort of natural watershed, preordained in nature by God, and consistent with divine promises and threats, and with grace and justice.” (Dutens II: 1, 229)

purification process by suggesting that it might in fact be quite agreeable, at least for good people like her; in fact, he concludes his letter by telling her “I believe that you will be purified like angel water placed in the sun” (A I 25, 446).¹¹ Given Leibniz’s obvious pastoral aims here, there are no grounds to suppose that he genuinely deviated from his lifelong belief that all post-mortem punishment involved psychological torment brought about naturally.

But while there are clear similarities between the form and mechanisms involved in purgatorial and eternal punishments, we also need to be aware of some key differences. The most notable is that while in both cases punishment is meted out to expiate sin,¹² in the case of those in purgatory this also has a cleansing and restorative effect. This much follows from Leibniz’s assertion in a text likely written c. 1705 that “It is true that blessed souls shall suffer it [purgatory] with joy, just as we willingly suffer a surgical operation that restores us to health” (LGR 249). Consequently, while the actual purpose of purgatorial punishment is to expiate a person’s sins, it also succeeds in correcting the sinner as well. We may surmise that eternal punishment has no such effect, and is simply expiatory. A second difference between purgatorial and eternal punishments is that those undergoing the former adopt a different attitude towards their punishment than those undergoing the latter. This is hinted at in the passage just quoted, in which Leibniz explains that the purification process, although not pleasant in itself, will be undertaken willingly by those destined to it. In “An Examination of the Christian Religion” (1686), he goes even further, arguing that when souls become “aware for the first time of the imperfection of their past life” they are “touched with extreme sorrow for the foulness of sin” and so “willingly submit themselves to it [purgation], not wanting to attain the height of beatitude in any other way” (A VI 4, 2455; see also LGR 31). There is no suggestion, however, that those condemned to hell undertake their punishment either willingly or cheerfully, and Leibniz’s description of their torment seems to preclude this.

3. Does Leibniz reduce hell to purgatory?

In the preceding sections we have seen that there is a clear *prima facie* case for supposing that Leibniz accepted both the doctrine of purgatory and that of eternal punishment, developing distinct arguments to justify each doctrine and outlining a natural mechanism through which both kinds of punishment would occur. The natural conclusion to draw from this is that Leibniz thought of purgatory and eternal punishment as distinct outcomes or destinations. However, some scholars have put forward an alternative interpretation, in which Leibniz held the view that after death all sinners will undergo a temporal punishment, following which they will be admitted to beatitude and reunited with God. On this reading, Leibniz is a supporter of the doctrine of universal salvation, and so effectively reduces hell to purgatory.¹³ Thus Gaston Grua writes that “Leibniz is tempted by the hypothesis of reducing hell to purgatory, the most attractive form of progress” (1956, 211). And in a similar vein, Paul Rateau claims that “His [Leibniz’s] position on purgatory (to which hell could ultimately be reduced) suggests a temporary punishment of sinners and, eventually, the possibility of their return to God” (Rateau 2015, 138). However, both authors reach this view in a different way. Let us start with Grua.

¹¹ Angel water [l’eau d’anges] is a seventeenth century perfume made from benzoin “tears”, Styrax resin, nutmeg and cinnamon, mixed with rose petals.

¹² Leibniz explains that meting out punishment for every sin is the fulfilment of God’s avenging or vindictive justice, which 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” (H 161). God thus punishes out of his desire to restore the moral order which was put out of balance by sin.

¹³ There are also those who have made the more limited claim that Leibniz endorsed universal salvation, without the further claim that this involves reducing hell to purgatory. See for example Becco 1978, Carlson 2001, Coudert 1995, and Wilson 1995. I have dealt with these claims in Strickland 2009, and I refer readers to that.

Grua claims that while Leibniz does maintain the doctrine of hell, this is “only in conditional terms, thus as something legitimate rather than certain in fact” (1956, 212). To support this, he cites Leibniz’s letter to Electress Sophie of 1694, in which Leibniz writes: “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” (LTS 104). Grua here appears to place a lot of weight on Leibniz’s decision to use the subjunctive mood. Yet he overlooks the fact that in a revised version of the same letter, Leibniz recast this part to remove the subjunctive, writing “my view is that the eternity of punishments is founded on the eternity of sins. Those who will always sin will always be justly punished” (LTS 111).

Grua also sees evidence for Leibniz’s inclination towards universal salvation in §272 of the *Theodicy* (1710), where, he says, Leibniz “cites with indulgence the hypothesis of the mitigation of hell” (1956, 213). There, Leibniz outlines a number of historical attempts to show that a damned soul might still be saved, but ends by saying “one must admit that all this detail is problematical, God having revealed to us all that is needed to put us in fear of the greatest of misfortunes, and not what is needed for our understanding thereof” (H 294). There is no evidence of an inclination to universal salvation here, unless it is supposed that Leibniz’s preparedness to discuss the doctrine somehow qualifies. I see no reason why it would, however.

The final piece of evidence on which Grua seeks to ground Leibniz’s apparent reduction of hell to purgatory is to be found in a letter to Johann Fabricius of 1711 in which Leibniz details his plan for an epic poem entitled *Uranias*. The poem was conceived as a project for Johann Wilhelm Petersen, one-time superintendent of Lüneburg and ardent supporter of millenarianism and universal salvation. The plan is as follows:

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 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. (LGR 300-1)

Grua supposes that Leibniz’s decision to include the doctrine of universal salvation in the plan for the poem reveals his sympathy for it (1956, 213). The thinking seems to be that Leibniz would not have proposed its inclusion if he did not advocate the doctrine himself. Grua’s reasoning, while hardly conclusive, does at least have a superficial plausibility. However, if we accept it 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 millenarianism; yet there is solid evidence from elsewhere to suggest that he was not a millenarian.¹⁴ The upshot is that Grua’s reasoning is faulty: just because Leibniz suggested

¹⁴ For discussions of some of this evidence, see Cook and Strickland 2011, and Antognazza and Hotson 1999.

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 follow-up 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” (Dutens V, 297). In all likelihood, the inclusion of millenarianism and universal salvation in the poem was a concession to Petersen, who was deeply committed to both doctrines, and so might be reasonably be thought to be more inclined to undertake the project if they were featured in it.¹⁵

Let us turn now to Rateau’s case for supposing that Leibniz favoured the doctrine of universal salvation and so ultimately reduced hell to purgatory. Rateau sees hints of this in a late text, “Revolution” (1715), in which Leibniz considers the future improvement of the human race. Leibniz writes, for example:

Besides, it can actually be concluded from this that the human race will not always remain in the same state, since it is not in keeping with the divine harmony to always play the same chord. And it should even be believed as a result of the natural principles of fittingness that things must progress towards the better, either gradually or even sometimes by leaps. For although things constantly seem to get worse, this should be thought to happen in the same way that we sometimes step back in order to jump with a greater impetus. (HD 74)

In this text, Leibniz is not concerned with the doctrine of universal salvation or the restitution of things, but rather the question of whether there will be progress in human knowledge. And to my mind, Leibniz’s remarks about progress are intended to apply not to all humans in the eternity to come, but to *future generations of humans*, and the advances in knowledge that they will enjoy, for example in explaining the structure of flies, understanding very complicated mathematical theorems etc., so that ultimately future generations will be able to understand things “which are now beyond the capacity of humans” (HD 76). Rateau himself notes that Leibniz’s remarks in this text do not imply that all humans will one day be blessed, and in fact are quite compatible with some of them being damned to eternal punishment.

Nevertheless, Rateau suggests that Leibniz “doubtless favoured the hypothesis of universal salvation” and left clues to this effect rather than an explicit declaration (Rateau 2015, 136). According to Rateau, one such clue is §18 of the *Theodicy* (1710), in which Leibniz describes “a theology well-nigh astronomical” developed by “a man of wit” that involves *inter alia* the ultimate salvation of all, even those initially subject to damnation (H 133). However, in order to read this as support for universal salvation one has to ignore Leibniz’s explicit statement at the start of §18 that he does not approve of the speculations of the unnamed “man of wit”, and another at the end that there is no need for that person’s hypothesis, and that reason can find no value in it.¹⁶

Lastly, Rateau points to a number of texts in which Leibniz sides – albeit conditionally – with the hypothesis of universal salvation. For example, in a letter written in 1698, Leibniz indicates that if it was up to him (“If I had the choice”), he would rather endorse Jane Leade’s vision of salvation for all over Jakob Böhme’s claim that the damned

¹⁵ One might wonder why Leibniz wanted the poem written at all, and why he was prepared to allow it to promote doctrines that he did not personally endorse. I have dealt with this in Strickland 2009, 330.

¹⁶ In his initial draft of the *Theodicy*, Leibniz reveals that he is acquainted with the “man of wit” concerned, and concludes his discussion by saying that “my friend will permit me to treat it [sc. the well-nigh astronomical theology] as rather fanciful”, suggesting that the author of the hypothesis did not take it seriously himself. Both claims were removed from the final book. See the manuscript held in the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek, Hanover, under the shelfmark LH 1, 1, 1, Bl. 58r.

remain damned for all eternity (A I 16, 164). In another letter, from 1706, Leibniz again indicates that if it was up to him (“If one had to choose”), he would by far prefer Jean Le Clerc’s doctrine of universal salvation to Pierre Bayle’s doctrine of Manicheism, since “the one tries to amplify God’s goodness, and the other diminishes both the goodness and power of the divinity” (G III, 310). While Leibniz’s preferences are clear, his language suggests that the choice about what to actually believe is not his to make. Although somewhat conjectural, we might suppose that this is because he feels that universal salvation, for all its appeal, is not a piece of revealed theology, whereas the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment is, and so is the doctrine that one should believe in spite of whether one personally finds it appealing or not. As partial confirmation of this, it should be borne in mind that during the period in which these passages were written, Leibniz continued to justify the doctrine of eternal punishment and assume that it would be the ultimate fate of some humans (see above, section 1).

Nevertheless, the passages Rateau cites are suggestive that Leibniz’s attitude towards universal salvation had softened in later life, even if not to the point that he was prepared to commit himself to it. Other passages may be adduced to support this reading. For example, Leibniz tells a correspondent in 1702 that a book about universal salvation contains “some pleasant ideas” (A I 20, 817). And we have already encountered Leibniz’s remark in 1711 that universal salvation is “an opinion which I do not condemn at all, but which I am not willing to make my own” (D V, 297). On the basis of such remarks I do not think that one could legitimately draw the conclusion that Leibniz actually did come to favour the doctrine of universal salvation, or even that he inclined towards it. But one surely could draw the more restricted conclusion that in later life Leibniz ceased to think of the doctrine of universal salvation as dangerous, and perhaps also that in later life he came to *hope* the doctrine was true, and that hell would ultimately reduce to purgatory. If we read Leibniz this way, we avoid having to paint him as duplicitous, because it would be no reflection on his sincerity that he continued to publically endorse the doctrine of eternal punishment while simultaneously hoping that universal salvation would actually be the true doctrine.¹⁷

¹⁷ I would like to thank Daniel J. Cook and Markku Roinilla for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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