Justice, Happiness, and Perfection in Leibniz’s City of God

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The word ‘theodicy’ (theodicaea or théodicée) appears to have been coined by Leibniz. Its Greek etymology suggests the meaning, theou dikē, God’s justice. God’s justice is the “title topic” of Leibniz’s book. The vindication of God’s justice is certainly one of the central aims of the book. Nothing, I believe, more clearly marks Leibniz, with all his personal and institutional conservatism, as an archetypal theologian of the Enlightenment in Protestant Germany than his emphasis on justice as an attribute of God, and the way in which he conceives of it.

The first section of my lecture is devoted to elucidation of Leibniz’s conception of divine justice. In the second section I will argue that his vindication of God’s justice, so conceived, depends on more than the perfection of the actual world, which Leibniz famously emphasizes. It depends also, or even primarily, on the happiness and virtue of the City of God, which Leibniz conceives as composed of all intelligent substances, with God as its ruler. This discussion will be continued in sections 3 and 4 with attention to the Leibniz’s claims about the happiness of those who love God, and the punishment of others, in the City of God, and will conclude, in the fifth and final section of the lecture, with exploration of the epistemological modality of some of these claims.

1. Justice

Leibniz declares that “[God’s] goodness and his justice, as well as his wisdom, do not differ from ours, except that they are infinitely more perfect” (T pd4). The univocal attribution of moral properties to God and to human beings is an Enlightenment theme that still resonates in John Rawls’s insistence that “the basic judgments of reasonableness must be the same, whether made by God’s reason or by ours.”

Rawls does not discuss the univocity of justice as an attribute of God and humans, and he might have had more problems with that. In his view justice is primarily a predicate of

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1Works of Leibniz are cited by abbreviations as listed at the end of this paper.

2John Rawls, “On My Religion,” in Rawls, A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith, with On My Religion (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 268. The quoted document, written in the 1990s, is noncommittal as to whether God exists, but quite definite as to how God’s moral attributes should be conceived.
complete political societies, and the most important case of justice as an attribute of a human individual is that of supporting the justice of such a society as a member of it, accepting the fair share it assigns one in the burdens, opportunities, and risks of human life in such a society. That can hardly be a way in which God is just, apart from incarnation as a rational but quite finite social animal.

Leibniz’s political theory allows him, more easily than may be possible for Rawls, to predicate justice univocally of God and humans. He argues that “the principle of [God’s] justice ... will not be that equity, or that equality, which obtains among men,” and which leads to the maxim “to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” God’s motive must rather be “that of perfection,” to “aim at the good and at perfection so far as possible” (R 56-58). In accordance with this judgment, Leibniz offers his favorite definition of justice, “Justice is the charity of the wise” (cf. G III.386, VII.549; T 179; cf. PNG 9). He adds that “this follows from the nature of God” (Gr 392).

Leibniz argues that “this same motive has a place in truly virtuous and generous men, whose supreme function [degré] is to imitate divinity, insofar as human nature is capable of it” (R 57-58). This applies most easily to the case of a wise and benevolent magistrate. Equality (cf. R 56) and individual autonomy have a much smaller and less central place in his political vision than Rawls, or the French Revolution, would claim for them. It is clear that he expected the wise to be few (R 58, 103-4; G VI.25/H 49). The just state would accordingly be paternalistic in a somewhat authoritarian way (cf. R 77-79, 98-99, 107-8). In such a political vision, justice as charity of the wise can be ascribed univocally, without obvious incongruity, to human magistrates and to God.

Having defined justice as “charity conformed to wisdom,” Leibniz goes on to say that “charity is a universal benevolence,” and that “benevolence is a disposition to love” and “to love is to find pleasure in the good, the perfection, the happiness of another” (G VII.549). How universal is charity’s benevolence? Leibniz’s answer is that it extends to all and only rational beings—not only “the whole human kind,” but “rather the whole kind of users of reason” (A VI.iv.2891). That is also the domain of justice, in his view. In 1696 he writes that “Justice [is] nothing but the order that is observed with regard to the evil and good of intelligent creatures” (Gr 379). And in his Latin summary of the Theodicy he states that “Goodness related specifically to intelligent creatures, conjoined with wisdom, constitutes Justice” (CD 50).

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For justice, according to Leibniz, is a social virtue (R77). It governs attitudes and actions in social relations among rational beings who can recognize each other as persons. Non-rational creatures are not included in the domain of justice. “Strictly speaking,” he says, “rights [jus] belong only to intelligent beings” (Gr 676).

This is connected with the fact that happiness of its objects is an essential end of charity, and hence of the motive of justice, in Leibniz’s view. When explaining the nature of justice as the charity of the wise, Leibniz sometimes mentions both the happiness and the perfection of the beloved, but commonly only the happiness, as the end at which that charity aims. And he denied that non-rational creatures are capable of happiness or misery, strictly speaking. “Of all the creatures that surround us,” he declares, “there is none but the human mind that is capable of a true happiness” (A VI.iv:2234).

2. The City of God

Famously central to Leibniz’s attempted vindication of God’s goodness in creating this one of all possible worlds, despite all the evils it contains, is the claim that God did the right thing, because this is the best of all possible worlds. The most troubling problem about this claim finds its classic expression in Candide’s question: “if this is the best of all possible worlds, what must the others be like?”

In Candide Voltaire scores, I think, a rhetorical but not a philosophical triumph in aiming his satire at the claim that this is the best of all possible worlds. Candide’s question is motivated by human sufferings caused by earthquakes, diseases, crimes and warcrimes. But Leibniz can and does agree that such things often happen (T pd43). The best of all possible worlds might not be the most accommodating to human beings. In determining which world is the best, one might argue, as Leibniz does in the Theodicy, that considerations of the good of intelligent creatures can in principle be outweighed on some points by considerations of the good or perfection to be realized in the existence of other, less excellent but more numerous creatures, and by considerations of order and harmony of the world as a whole (T 118; G VI.377-79/H

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5 As he wrote to Arnauld in 1687, “God governs brute substances following material laws of force or of communication of motion, but [governs] Minds following spiritual laws of Justice of which the others are incapable” (A II.ii.257-58 = LA 124).

6 To Arnauld, in the letter I quoted in the previous note, he says that because the souls of lower animals are “incapable of reflection or consciousness,” they are “not susceptible of happiness or unhappiness” (A II.ii.259 = LA 126; cf Gr 676)—which is not, I think, to say that they have no pleasures or pains, and is certainly not to say that there is no good or perfection at all in their existence.

7 Voltaire, Candide, ch. 6 in Voltaire, Romans et contes (Gallimard, 1975), p. 151. I have translated freely to capture the rhetorical impact.
379-80). And if we can manage to step back in a way from our human point of view, some of us may find it natural enough to regard the world as a whole as a marvelous thing, beautiful and awe-inspiring in its magnitude, variety, intricacy, and order, and perhaps even in its apparent making no exceptions for us. In a large metaphysical perspective one might hesitate to say that it would be a better world if it were better for us.\(^8\)

But that does not get Leibniz off Voltaire’s hook, insofar as his project is to vindicate God’s justice. For maximal goodness of the world as a whole is not sufficient to manifest God’s perfect justice, which is a social virtue that can be manifested only in God’s treatment of intelligent creatures, or persons. Wisdom’s regard for other values may limit the operation of charity’s specific focus on the good of rational creatures. But the destiny of intelligent creatures in the best possible world must still be quite splendid on the whole, if justice is to be worth singling out for celebration as an attribute of the Creator. And Leibniz does insist that “the happiness of intelligent creatures is the principal part of God’s designs” (T 118). It must be one of the chief excellences of the best world, if creating that world is to manifest God’s justice.

No less important for Leibniz’s theodicy, therefore, than his concept of the best possible world is his concept of the City of God. He says that God “makes of Minds the most excellent [le plus beau] of conceivable governments,” to which he refers as “the City of God” or “the republic of Minds.” Its membership includes all intelligent beings: humans, intelligent extraterrestrials (if any), also angels (assuming their existence, about which Leibniz says little), and God, too, as member and Monarch of the City.\(^9\) It is in this City of God, and not least in its happiness, that the justice of God, as a social virtue and a species of charity, must be manifested.\(^10\)

Accordingly Leibniz is prepared to argue from God’s perfection to the excellence of the City of God. He claims to have shown in the Theodicy


\(^9\) DM 36; T 130, 146, 112, 247; T all; Mon 84; see especially (PNG 15):

“all Minds, whether human or superhuman [genies], as they enter ... into a kind of Society with God, are members of the City of God, that is, of the most perfect state, formed and governed by the greatest and best of Monarchs, where there is no crime without punishment, no good deeds without proportionate reward, and finally as much virtue and happiness as is possible.”

\(^10\) I think the same is true of what Leibniz means in many contexts in speaking of God’s “goodness” [bonté]. In the “Monadology” he says of the City of God, that “it is ... in relation to this divine city that [God] has goodness [Bonté] in the strict sense, whereas his Wisdom and Power are shown everywhere” (Mon 86; cf. CD 50).
that it is a consequence of the supreme perfection of the Sovereign of the universe that the Kingdom of God is the most perfect of all possible States or governments, and that consequently what little evil is there is required for the completion \[le comble\] of the immense good that is found there (T a II = G VI.379/H 380).

Notwithstanding any compromises that divine wisdom might ordain among competing values in the universe,\(^{11}\) Leibniz is clearly committed to the claim that the perfection and happiness enjoyed by rational creatures in the City of God, or “Kingdom of Grace,” are great indeed.

Because of its relevance to the question of divine justice, this claim about the City of God is as crucial for Leibniz’s theodicy as his claims about the best possible world, and is, I believe, the claim which Voltaire’s objections should have led him to attack. How can Leibniz’s assertion of the immense actual virtue and happiness of rational creatures be defended against such objections? His positive argument for this assertion is an appeal to God’s “supreme perfection.” But the credibility of that argument may be strained in the absence of plausible responses to questions and objections such as Voltaire’s.

Where and when is the life of rational creatures so gloriously better and happier than it often seems to be in our here and now? Leibniz’s responses to such questions regularly involve appeals to ignorance; but he seeks starting points in what he thinks we do know about the universe. Invoking “modern discoveries,” as a resource for theology (T 19), he finds in Copernican astronomy larger views of the works of God, providing a distant view of plenty of room for societies of rational creatures far happier and more perfect than we are. "Our earth," he says, "is merely a satellite of one Sun, and there are as many Suns as fixed stars." So there may well be "planets" that "may be or become as happy as Paradise" (CD 58; cf. T 19, T a II).

More important, Leibniz believed he had adequate metaphysical reasons, as well as the support of divine revelation, for affirming the immortality of souls (T 89-90; PNG 9; Mon 76; G VI.26/H 50-51). And a future life beyond the veil of death affords plenty of room for manifestations of virtue and happiness not yet experienced by us. Life after death plays a central part in Leibniz’s theodicy. He locates in a future life the best parts of the perfection and happiness of the City of God, quoting St. Paul’s declaration (in Romans 8:18) that “the

\(^{11}\)The presence of such compromises may be suggested by Leibniz’s statement that God “chose not only to create human beings but also to create human beings as happy as is possible in this system” (T k22, my italics). Similarly, in 1697 Leibniz writes: “nor would the universe be perfect enough if as much care were not taken for individuals as consistency with the universal harmony allows” (G VII.307/L 490, my italics). Also relevant to this point is T 118: “It is certain that God sets more store by a human being than by a lion; nonetheless I do not know if one can be sure that God prefers one single human being to the whole species of lions in all respects.”
afflictions of this [present] time are not worthy [to be compared] with the future glory that will be revealed in us” (CD 54; cf. T a II; PNG 18).

The afterlife also has its problems for Leibniz. As he notes, doctrines of punishment—indeed eternal punishment—in the future life threaten to aggravate enormously the difficulty of the theological problem of evil (T 17); and much of the *Theodicy* responds to this problem, directly or indirectly. Leibniz’s argument for the happiness of those who love God, in this life and the next, will be the topic of section 3 of this lecture, and his views on the destiny of less virtuous souls will be discussed in section 4.

### 3. Perfection, Happiness, and Love for God

In the *Theodicy*, and in many other writings (e.g., A VI.iv.1364-66, 2240-83), sometimes indeed with evangelistic fervor, Leibniz proposes intellectual enlightenment, and his philosophy in particular, as a way of salvation, or of blessedness, as he might prefer to call it. This way of blessedness is built around a conception of essential relationships among love, perfection, and happiness. In the *Theodicy* and elsewhere, Leibniz gives voice to a deep conviction that “the love of God above all things ... is ... the principle of true religion.” He is willing to add that “this love is greater in proportion as it is more enlightened [plus éclairé]” (Gr 161).\(^\text{12}\) And by the very nature of love, Leibniz claims, this love has power to make the lover happy. Defining the nature of love, in “The Principles of Nature and of Grace,” in 1714, he states that “pure, genuine love consists in the state that makes one taste pleasure in the perfections and the happiness of the object of one’s love,” and reasons that “since God is the most perfect and the happiest ... of substances, that Love must give us the greatest pleasure of which one is capable, when God is its object” (PNG 16).\(^\text{13}\)

Leibniz sees such blessed love for God as arising from knowledge of God’s perfections. To love God, he says in the *Theodicy*’s Preface, “it suffices to envisage [God’s] perfections” (G VI.27/H 51; cf. A VI.iv.1364-66). Indeed, he holds that “one loves God more, the more one can give a reason for one’s love” (A VI.iv.1994f./L 280f.). That is why the way to blessedness he recommends is an intellectual, indeed a philosophical way. Leibniz’s univocal attribution of properties to God and to creatures, including us, helps prepare this way of blessedness. It is “easy” to envisage God’s perfections, Leibniz says in the Preface to the *Theodicy*, “because we

\(^\text{12}\)I have discussed this topic at greater length than is possible here, and with more citations from Leibniz’s writings, in R. M. Adams, “Leibniz’s *Examination of the Christian Religion,*” *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994): 526-36.

\(^\text{13}\)Similarly he says in the Preface to the *Theodicy* that “there is nothing so agreeable as loving what is worthy of love ... and there is nothing more perfect than God, nor anything more charming” (G VI.27/H 51).
find in ourselves their ideas,” because they are unlimited versions of perfections “of our own souls” (G VI.27/H 51).

This univocity thesis instantiates a fundamental doctrine of Leibniz’s theology, and of his metaphysics. He defined God as *ens perfectissimum*, the most perfect being, or more precisely as a being that has all perfections—by which he means, all the absolutely simple purely positive qualities, from which all other positive qualities must be derived, by conjunction or by limitation (A VI,iii,574, 579/L 167). Understanding reality in a sense in which a thing has reality just to the extent that it has positive qualities, Leibniz infers that the reality of all the less perfect beings, including our reality, must be constituted by limited versions of the divine perfections (cf. PNG 9, Mon 48).

*Why* would knowledge of God’s perfections give rise to love for God? How or why would one be disposed to find pleasure and happiness in God’s perfectness? Leibniz’s answer to this question is rooted in his conceptions of pleasure and happiness. He defines happiness 

[felicité] as “a durable state of pleasure” (Gr 579). He typically defines pleasure simply as a feeling (sensus, sentiment, Empfindung) of perfection. There are places where he defines pleasure rather as the feeling of an *increase* in perfection (A VI.iv.2760, 2234/L 218; cf. DM 15, G VII.112). More often, however, he seems to ignore this complication, and I will ignore it here too.

A more urgent question is raised by passages in Leibniz’s writing (such as DM 15) that could be read as suggesting that the felt perfection that constitutes one’s pleasure must be one’s own perfection. This suggests at best a useless precision, as Gaston Grua rightly remarks in his magisterial study of Leibniz’s ethics, “for knowledge and love transport into us the perfection of

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15In this Leibniz ascribes to God, in effect, one of the roles of the Platonic Form of the Good. A similar view of the essences of creatures as ways of imitating God can be found in much of Western tradition of philosophical theology. I have tried to place Leibniz in part of that story in R. M. Adams, “The Priority of the Perfect in the Philosophical Theology of the Continental Rationalists,” in Michael Ayers, ed., *Rationalism, Platonism and God: A Symposium on Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) (Proceedings of the British Academy, 149), pp. 91-116. I cannot claim that Leibniz had a well developed account of the derivation of limited perfections from the divine perfections, or indeed of the relations among different types of perfection more generally. That may give rise to problems for his conception of the best of all possible worlds, but is not, I think, a crucial problem for his claims about divine justice in the City of God.

16He also gives more complex definitions, in which happiness is durable joy or gladness [*laetitia*], which in turn is defined in terms of a preponderance of present pleasures over present pains or griefs (e.g. Gr 589, 603-4).

the object.”\textsuperscript{18} Leibniz gives a more complete account of his view when he says, “Pleasure is a knowledge or feeling of perfection, not only in ourselves, but also in another, for then some perfection is evoked in us” (Gr 579; cf. G VII.86). The perfection of a created substance, in Leibniz’s monadological metaphysics, is perfection of its perceptions and powers of perception. The \textit{Monadology} (§§49-50) suggests the distinctness of the perceptions as a measure of the substance’s perfection. Leibniz’s writings on love suggest that perfection of the object perceived also adds to the perfection of a perception, as one might expect in a philosophy of broadly Platonic inspiration.

In view of these considerations we may expect, as Leibniz sees things, that a person who has an unclouded knowledge of God’s perfections will find great pleasure in knowing them—indeed, greater pleasure in knowing them than in knowing anything else. And this state, if durable, will constitute the greatest happiness possible for us—and at the same time, a love for God above all else, in accordance with Leibniz’s definition of love.

Therefore we should not be surprised that Leibniz makes clear in a number of his writings that he believed that a pure love of God above all things is a sufficient condition of supreme and eternal happiness or blessedness. I believe, indeed, that he regarded that as a truth of reason, with which truths of faith must be in conformity. He was less ready to say that a pure love of God is also a necessary condition of supreme blessedness; but I think he believed that too, and he did say something theologically akin to that in a set of notes written in the mid-1680s: “No one can be justified without a true love for God” (A VI.iv.2355).

This line of thought is not without its problems for Leibniz. In particular, he confronted questions about the theological orthodoxy of the thesis that a pure love for God above all things is sufficient for blessedness, now and in eternity. The problem, and Leibniz’s view about it, are clearly articulated, relatively early in his career, in a dialogue that he wrote in 1679 for Duke Johann Friedrich of Hanover. The dialogue is thought to be a lightly fictionalized version of conversations that actually took place between Leibniz (represented in the dialogue by Theophile, a Lutheran) and Nikolaus Steno, the Roman Catholic apostolic vicar at the court of Hanover (represented by Poliandre).

Theophile introduces the topic with his thesis: “You’ll agree that those who love God above all things are in a condition [\textit{en estat}] to be saved.” The problem is voiced by Poliandre: “A pagan Philosopher can love God above all things, since reason can teach him that God is a being infinitely perfect and supremely lovable. But he will not be a Christian, for all that, for

\textsuperscript{18}Grua, \textit{La justice humaine selon Leibniz}, p. 48.
perhaps he will not have heard tell of Jesus Christ, without whom there is no salvation. Therefore love of God is not enough.”

Theophile replies ironically, suggesting that the sufficiency of love for God can be reconciled with the necessity of knowing Christ, in accordance with

the thought of several learned and pious Theologians, who believe that God enlightens all those who seek him sincerely, at least at the point of death, by revealing to them, even internally, what they need to know of Jesus Christ.

Theophile adds that this follows “that incontestable rule, that God does not refuse his grace to those who do what depends on them.” Poliandre finds this resolution of the matter agreeable, and changes the subject (A VI.iv.2220-21).

The problem receives essentially the same discussion thirty-one years later in the Theodicy (T 95-98). Similar treatments of the issue of the salvation of non-Christians occur fairly often in Leibniz’s writings. It is clear that Leibniz cared deeply about the issue. He expressed himself with biting bluntness, unusual for him, in a letter of 1690 to his Roman Catholic friend Count Ernst von Hessen-Rheinfels. Citing Antoine Arnauld as saying he “finds it strange that so many millions of pagans have not been condemned,” Leibniz comments, “I would find it much stranger if they were condemned. I don’t know why we are so moved to believe people damned or plunged into eternal miseries even when they could not help it. But that occasions thoughts that are hardly compatible with the goodness and justice of God” (A I.vi.107-8).

4. Punishment in the City of God

Leibniz’s argument that a pure love of God above all things is intrinsically beatifying is not the whole story about his City of God. In that happy society there are not only virtue and its rewards, but also crime and punishment. Leibniz describes God’s City as one in which “there is no crime without punishment, no good deeds without proportionate reward” (PNG 15).

Historically the most discussed aspect of Leibniz’s treatment of punishment in the City of God is his attitude toward the doctrine of eternal punishment. Three things are clear about this.

Well known when the Theodicy was published was a document he sent to the French Catholic writer Paul Pellisson-Fontanier, which Pellisson published in 1691 without getting Leibniz’s permission. In it Leibniz discusses the view that “there is no revealed article [of belief] that is absolutely necessary, and that thus one can be saved in all Religions, provided that one truly loves God above all things with a friendship-love based on his infinite perfections” (A I.vi.78-79). He presented the view as that of some respected Roman Catholic theologians, and opposed by Protestant theologians; he did not say that was his own. But the warmth with which he presented the view, and the perfunctory treatment he gave to the less adventurous alternative he mentioned, left little doubt in the minds of contemporary readers, including Pellisson, that Leibniz believed the view. Leibniz seems to have suffered little or no this-worldly harm from such perceptions.
One is that in his writings Leibniz repeatedly endorsed the doctrine and never rejected it. A second is that one of the grounds of justification of punishment that Leibniz accepts, though not the only one, is purely retributive. He holds that the justification of punishment can be “grounded in a relation of fitness which satisfies not only the offended party, but also the Wise who see it, as a beautiful piece of music, or again a good piece of architecture, satisfies cultured minds” (T 73). The Theodicy does not support this retributivism with much argument, and the suggestion of cultured minds finding aesthetic satisfaction in the punishment of wrongdoers is hardly winsome.

Considerations of retributive fitness do function, however, to limit the extent of justified punishment. They appear to motivate a third and most characteristic feature of Leibniz’s views on eternal punishment. He holds that only those who go on sinning forever will be punished forever; “punishment is not eternal unless sin is also eternal” (Gr 249). This is Leibniz’s reply to the objection that there is a “disproportion ... between an eternal punishment and a limited crime.” He declines to argue that a finite creature could commit a sin that is infinite because it offends an infinite God. For “it [is] enough to say that the duration of the fault caused the duration of the punishment” (T 133, 266). “Even if we ... conceded that no sin is infinite in itself, nonetheless it can certainly be said that the sins of the damned are infinite in number, since they persist in sinning through all eternity.”

On this view there is never a time at which anyone has been sentenced to eternal punishment for sins already committed. The lost souls


21This sort of partly aesthetic rationale for divine punishment is by no means origianl with Leibniz. Cf. Augustine, On Free Choice of Will (De Libero Arbitrio, many editions and translations), III.9.

22In a draft of a passage I quoted above from a letter to Count Ernst, Leibniz himself says something he might take to heart in this context: “I don’t know why we take so much pleasure in believing people are damned. Isn’t there a bit of vanity and corruption of the human heart that finds a secret joy in the bad things that happen to someone else, in exalting oneself above so many people that one thinks are miserable?” (A II.ii.340-41). The idea of retribution as an aspect of harmony may be evoked more persuasively when Leibniz speaks of “the very law of justice dictating that each one have a part in the perfection of the universe, and in happiness of his own, in proportion to his own virtue and to the will by which he is moved toward the common good” (E 149/L 490). But that articulates no reason why misery, as distinct from lesser degrees of happiness, should be a product of the charity of the wise.

23Leibniz, Preface to a planned republication of a work by Ernst Soner which argued that eternal punishment would be unjust (my italics). Leibniz’s brief preface was first published by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, in his essay, “Leibniz on Eternal Punishment,” and can be found in the original in Lessing, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 7 (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1956), pp. 459-60, and in English in Lessing, Philosophical and Theological Writings, translated and edited by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 41-42.
“are always able to be set free, but they never will it,” as Leibniz puts it in one of his earliest writings on this subject (A VI.iii.138/CP 81). 24

The thesis that never-ending punishment, if just, must be based on never-ending sin drew profoundly interesting comment in the early 1770s, in an interchange between two notable fans of Leibniz, Johann August Eberhard and Gottfried Ephraim Lessing. From their insightful discussion, which began as debate and ended with a large measure of agreement, I have time here to draw out just one significant point.

Lessing noted that punishment could be infinite in duration, and thus extensively infinite, without being intensively infinite by being infinitely painful at a single time. Eberhard went further, drawing a more decisive consequence from Leibniz’s view that the only way in which punishment of a finite individual can justly be infinite is by being extensively infinite in duration. Such a view, Eberhard argued, does not allow for punishment that is intensively infinite. 25

Taken together the arguments of Eberhard and Lessing suggest a view of eternal punishment much milder than traditional visions of fire and brimstone. Lessing explicitly denies that physical torture is an ingredient in divinely ordained punishment after death; only natural psychological consequences of sin are to be part of that. 26

To what extent would Leibniz accept this softening of the conception of punishment after death? What is his view of the nature or quality, and specifically the intensity, of punishments in the City of God? Reflection on points made by Eberhard and Lessing suggests that for issues of theodicy this question is at least as important as the question of duration of punishments.

Particularly important, I believe, is the question whether any intelligent creature’s existence will be so unhappy, so miserable, in the end and on the whole, that it would be preferable for that creature if it had never existed. At least at first glance, one might think that a negative answer to this question would be more propitious for vindication of the wise Creator’s charity. And I can see several lines of thought suggested by Leibniz’s work that might incline him to such an answer.

One is exemplified by a passage in which he imagines a sinner complaining that God did not give him enough strength to resist temptation. To the question “Why didn’t God give you more strength?” Leibniz gives an answer that exploits a feature of his own determinism. He replies, “if [God] had done that, you would not be, for he would have produced, not you, but

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another creature” (A VI,iv,1639). This response plainly does not work to vindicate God’s justice toward the questioner except on the assumption that the questioner has good reason to be glad that he exists rather than not. Otherwise, he could reasonably reply as follows. ‘That’s right: I wouldn’t exist. For me, however, existence is not preferable to non-existence. That’s what I’m complaining about!’

I have noticed only two passages in Leibniz’s works in which there is clear, explicit articulation of the question, whether anyone’s existence will on the whole be worse than never existing. One is in notes for his own use that he wrote in 1705 on an English religious pamphlet. Discussing issues about the creation of persons destined to be damned, the English author, known to us only as “J.C.,” poses the question I have in mind: “Were it not better such Persons never had been?” J.C. answers,

A Beeing even in a condemned Sinner, is preferable to no Beeing, as far as his Beeing is the work of his Creator, for it is simply better to be something than nothing; but the dismal Miseries and Torments attending the Sinner and annex’d to his Crime are no positive Beeing, but a privation of well-Beeing, The sole effect and product of Malice and Sin.28

One might think Leibniz should have agreed with these views, or indeed have gone further. He is committed to the thesis that everything in the created universe has perfection to the degree that it is positively real, and that evil is rooted in privation.29 He also holds that every created substance perceives completely, albeit more or less confusedly, the best of all possible worlds. At the most fundamental level, in the Leibnizian universe, there is nothing to be perceived but perfection, in higher or lower degree. So if pleasure is perception of perfection, why shouldn’t Leibniz hold that the existence of all substances capable of pleasure or displeasure is predominantly pleasant? Couldn’t he thus give an argument that all of us will at worst get to Limbo?

So far as I know, Leibniz never goes there—not explicitly, anyway. Commenting on the passage I’ve quoted from J.C., he says,

27Whether Leibniz recognized these facts about the dialectical situation of the argument, and what he would have said about them, I do not know. For a much earlier hint of the argument, but perhaps not quite so clear in its bearing on theodicy, see CP 148.

28J.C. An Answer to the Query of a Deist, concerning the Necessity of Faith (1687), p. 11.

29This is an Augustinian thesis. On the thought that “A Beeing even in a condemned Sinner, is preferable to no Beeing,” cf. Augustine, On Free Choice of Will, III.8.
I would distinguish, and say that for such a man himself it would be better not to be, as Christ too says explicitly that for such a man it would be better not to have been born. But it is better for the universe itself for the matter to be as it is (Gr 252).

Perhaps respect for texts of Scripture cited in this passage (Matthew 26:24; Mark 14:21) kept Leibniz from affiriming the thesis, otherwise so well suited to his optimistic philosophy, that even those, if any, who are eternally punished have an existence that is preferable to non-being.

The other passage in which the question emerges explicitly is more public and seems intentionally indecisive. It is in the _Theodicy_, at the end of the Appendix on Archbishop King’s _Essay on the Origin of Evil_. Leibniz describes King as doubting “whether it isn’t better to be damned than to be Nothing,” since the damned may find in their misery the source of a perverse pleasure that they take in criticizing the ways of God. Leibniz comments: “These thoughts are not to be despised, and I have sometimes had similar ones, but I am not inclined to pass final judgment on them” (G VI.436/H 441; cf. T 270-71).

King’s verdict on the thought that it is better to be damned than to be nothing is negative. He says, “’Tis better for [the damned] indeed not to be than to be; but only in the opinion of wise Men, to which [the damned] do not assent.”

When he wrote “The Confession of a Philosopher,” almost forty years earlier, Leibniz might have agreed precisely with King. In the _Theodicy_ he declines quite publicly, if somewhat vaguely, to pass a final verdict on the thought.

This is by no means the only passage in which Leibniz expresses himself indecisively, tentatively, or with highly nuanced modalities of approval and disapproval, regarding opinions about divine punishment. There are enough such passages in the _Theodicy_ that it is not surprising to find Eberhard hypothesizing that in trying to commend his philosophy to all parties, Leibniz “posited their doctrines as suppositions, and assigned them a tolerable sense, in accordance with which he reconciled them to his system, without committing himself to them.”

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31See CP 142. This passage may express the “similar thoughts” that Leibniz says he has had. It does suggest that the damned may have a perverse pleasure similar to that suggested by King.

32Eberhard, _Neue Apologie des Sokrates_, vol. I (second edition, 1776), pp. 396-97. In the second (and later) volume of the _Neue Apologie_, responding to Lessing’s critique, Eberhard insists he did not mean to accuse Leibniz of vanity or anything dishonorable (II.491-92).
Certainly Leibniz not only tried to reconcile the doctrine of eternal punishment with his system, but also argued that an “Origenist,” a partisan of the doctrine of universal salvation, would be “even easier to satisfy” (T 211), as Eberhard points out. I believe that Leibniz did in fact adhere to a doctrine of eternal punishment. But such a characterization is too simple to do justice to the complexities of Leibniz’s attitudes. To understand them, we need to take into account the placement of theology in Leibniz’s epistemology.

5. Theology as Jurisprudence for the City of God

An important discussion of the epistemology of theology is found in a letter that Leibniz wrote to the Scottish nobleman Thomas Burnett of Kemney in February 1697 (G III.193-94). There he divides “Theological truths and inferences” into “two species.” Those that “can be demonstrated absolutely, with metaphysical necessity and in a way that is not contestable,” have “metaphysical certainty.” The others have at most “moral certainty.” For Leibniz this is the chief partition in theology. Metaphysical certainty trumps all other epistemic modalities for Leibniz; in that way faith must be in conformity with reason. Leibniz sees this distinction as largely coinciding with the distinction between natural theology and revealed theology. Much, at least, of natural theology belongs to the metaphysically certain sort (cf. T pd44).

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33Eberhard, Neue Apologie des Sokrates, II.496. The Theodicy’s most elaborate treatment of the rival doctrines of universal salvation and eternal punishment (T 17-19) is a striking example of the nuancing of approval and disapproval. It seems to be artfully constructed to lead up to a defense of acceptance of the doctrine of eternal punishment while avoiding any severe criticism of the most significant historic defenders of the doctrine of universal salvation. A peripheral but striking example of delicately nuanced attitudes is found in a letter of 1712, in which a form of the doctrine of universal salvation, contained in a religious epic poem whose publication he was encouraging, is described by Leibniz as “an opinion which I condemn least of all, but am unwilling to make my own” (D V.297). This case and its context are described at length in Strickland, “Leibniz on Eternal Punishment,” pp. 327-30.

34As Eberhard eventually acknowledged (Neue Apologies des Sokrates, vol. II (Berlin: Friedrich Nikolai, 1778), pp. 482-83.)

35This thesis was largely accepted in scholastic theology, as Leibniz insists. However, he pushed it farther than many theologians would, as reflected in Arnauld’s dismissive reaction (A II.i.9-1/ LA 15-16) to Leibniz’s insistence that he could not in good conscience join the Roman Catholic church if it would not tolerate certain “philosophical opinions, of which [he believed he had] a demonstration” (A L.iv.320-21).
includes the principles of divine justice, and what follows from them, such as that God will not
damn the innocent, and that “the necessary grace will not be denied to one who does what is in
his power” (T 95). I believe Leibniz also thought it absolutely certain, and a part of the true
natural theology, that God will not damn anyone who has a pure love of God above all things.
But what depends on “History and the facts,” or on “the interpretation of texts,” as revealed
theology does, belongs to the sort of theology that cannot have more than moral certainty.36

In the letter to Burnett Leibniz also divides philosophy into two parts. “Theoretical
philosophy is founded on true analysis, of which the Mathematicians give examples... But
practical Philosophy is founded on ... the art of estimating the degrees of proofs,” or as we would
say, of probabilities. Thus Leibniz assigns merely probable reasoning as such, to the practical
part of philosophy. Why does Leibniz do that? For the same reason, I think, that the highest
degree of probability is called moral certainty. That means a strong enough probability of truth
to act on77—indeed, I think we should add, strong enough to act on decisively in matters of the
greatest importance. The practical character of probable reasoning is underlined when Leibniz
tells Burnett that “only the Jurists,” whose reasoning, of course, is required to be practical, “have
given examples ... that can serve as a beginning for forming a science of proofs, suitable for
verifying historical facts and for giving the meaning of texts.”

Although Leibniz classified the science of probabilities as part of practical philosophy, it
is clear that he thought that the degrees of probability can be determined theoretically, and that a
high degree of theoretical probability is required for rational acceptance of a merely probable
proposition.38 The most plausible interpretation of his view, I believe, is that for any degree of
probability less than metaphysical certainty, practical reason, and not just theoretical reason, is
required to justify the conclusion, ‘Therefore I (or we) should accept this proposition.’ That is
because how much probability is required to justify acceptance depends on what is at stake. In
terms native to our discourse of probability, not Leibniz’s, where the probability of a proposition
is less than 1.0, acceptance of the proposition must be justified by expected utilities, and not by
theoretical probabilities of truth alone.

36 In the Theodicy also it is clearly Leibniz’s view that the “proofs” or “motives of credibility” of revealed
religion “can give only a moral certainty” (T pd5; cf. pd1).
37 Cf. Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, IV.205.
38 See Adams, Leibniz, pp. 200-201.
On this reading, Leibniz did recognize purely theoretical beliefs about probabilities of propositions, but did not also recognize purely theoretical beliefs that have as objects merely probable propositions themselves, rather than their probabilities. Instead he recognized beliefs that consist in commitment to act on an assumption of truth, based on a judgment that the assumed proposition is prudent or safe to act on—or, in his role as jurist, that it is just to act on it. This is reflected in the many places in his theological writings, including the Theodicy, where the reasons that he seems to give as his decisive basis for adopting some merely probable view are that it is the safest one to hold, or that rejected alternatives are harmful.

The extent of Leibniz’s epistemological pragmatism in theology may be surprising, but he is not exactly an innovator in assigning revealed theology to the province of practical reason. Discussion of the question, whether theology is a theoretical or a practical science goes back at least to the thirteenth century. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that theology is primarily a theoretical science; but St. Bonaventure argued that it is primarily a practical science, on the ground that its principal end is “that we should become good,” and particularly that we should be moved to love God.39

What are the ends of revealed theology that shape the expected utilities in Leibniz’s thinking about it? I am sure that Leibniz would agree with Bonaventure in giving a preeminent place to the goal of fostering love for God. Indeed, Leibniz does in a number of places in the Theodicy argue against views on the ground that they do not allow an adequate basis for loving God. But another end that theology is supposed to serve also looms large in the Theodicy. We meet it early in the Preface, where he narrates a brief history of religions—or at any rate a history of the religions of Europe and the Mediterranean world. It can fairly be called a narrative of enlightenment—or of “the education of the human race,” as Lessing would later put it in the title of a celebrated essay.40 It is a history of the development of “natural religion” and particularly of its attainment of public authority in and through what would later be called the “positive religions.” Nothing is more emphasized in this narrative than the achievement of the revealed religions of ancient Israel and Christianity in “making natural religion pass into law.” That, Leibniz says, is what ancient philosophers among the Gentiles could not accomplish, though they


already possessed (as he implies) truths of natural religion. But with the triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire, “the religion of the wise became [the religion] of the peoples” (G VI.26-27/H 50-51).

The connection of Christian revelation with law is a fixed point in Leibniz’s theological thinking. In the mid-1680s, in his largest work in systematic theology, he wrote that God “as legislator declares his particular and public [apertam] will regarding the acts of minds and the governance of his city, and fixes rewards and punishments, and for that purpose instituted revelations” (A VI.iv.2361, italics added). And in a private document of 1693, he wrote, “Theology is a sort of divine jurisprudence, explicating the legal principles [jura] of our association with God” (Gr 241).

Why this connection between revelation and law? Why does Leibniz, an adherent of what we call the Lutheran church, think religion should become law? There certainly are traditions in which law is absolutely central to religious piety, but Lutheran Christianity was not originally one of them. The answer to this question most clearly indicated by Leibniz is that the making known of rewards and punishments set by God is necessary if the religion of the wise is to become the religion of the many. It is needed as a motive for the majority of human beings to move toward moral and spiritual improvement and health, since relatively few attain in this life to a pure love of God above all things (R 58-59).

Leibniz clearly believed that these benefits depend greatly on established religious institutions, to interpret God’s will, with the aid of established doctrines about God’s particular dealings with human beings. I believe this is a major motive of his theological conservatism, his reluctance to abandon doctrines established in a sufficiently wide range of Christian churches. Leibniz requires of doctrines of revealed religion that they have sufficient objective probability or “motives of credibility.” But so long as that condition is satisfied, even though it amounts only to moral certainty, he thinks it is practically rational to refuse to abandon established doctrines of revealed religion unless an objection to the doctrine is proved with metaphysical certainty (T pd 1-3).

These considerations may help us understand the epistemic modality of Leibniz’s acceptance of the doctrine of eternal punishment. With that in mind I will comment on two more texts. In January 1695 Leibniz wrote a letter to one Lorenz Hertel, in which he said about the rival doctrine of universal salvation,

All that can be said about it 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 [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.xi.21).
Against the background of his epistemology, I think it is fair to say that in this text Leibniz grants that he does not know whether all humans (or all rational creatures) will be saved in the end or not. Given his insistence that sinful acts of creatures are contingent, and that eternal punishment depends on eternal sinning, he has reason to think it is not certain that any sinful creature will never repent and be saved. But he argues that it is practically unwise to adopt universalism because we can foresee moral and spiritual harm that might result from it, and because it is not ecclesiastically established as a revealed doctrine as the rival doctrine of eternal punishment is.

Much the same stance is expressed, less fully but very elegantly, in a statement that can be viewed as crowning the Theodicy’s discussions of this subject. After discussing a number of texts bearing on the question whether it is possible for a damned person to be “delivered,” Leibniz concludes that “it must be confessed that this whole case [tout ce detail] is problematic, God having revealed to us what is needed for fearing the greatest of woes, and not what is needed for understanding it” (T 277). Here knowledge seems to be denied. Rather, a practical spiritual advantage is claimed for believing in eternal punishment—or more precisely, for fearing it.

This does not mean that Leibniz could not sincerely profess belief in eternal punishment. I assume that he was sincerely committed to speak, and more generally to act, on the assumption that the doctrine is true, and that he sincerely regarded the doctrine as having at least the minimum theoretical probability required to sustain such a commitment to a practically advantageous proposition. Given his epistemology, what more by way of sincerity of belief can we reasonably expect of him?

I permit myself a concluding comment: I believe that Leibniz was terribly mistaken about the alleged moral and spiritual advantages of accepting the doctrine of eternal punishment. Of the main practical concerns that shaped his theodicy, fear or caution about disturbing established institutions is a very questionable spiritual guide for people who live in a time in which established religious institutions have been disturbed and will be disturbed. Leibniz’s conception of a piety of loving God as a way of blessedness is, I think, of much more permanent interest.
REFERENCES TO WORKS OF LEIBNIZ

The works of Leibniz are cited by the following abbreviations. All works are cited by page number unless otherwise noted below. Entries separated by a slash refer to the original and an English translation of the same passage. I usually quote Leibniz in my own English translation, though I have consulted published English translations.

A = Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, edition of the Berlin Academy (Darmstadt and Berlin, 1923-), cited by series, volume, and page.


CD = Causa Dei, cited from G VI by section number.

D = Opera omnia, ed. by L. Dutens (Geneva, 1768), cited by volume and page.

DM = Discourse on Metaphysics, cited by section number.

E = Opera Philosophica, ed. by J. E. Erdmann (Berlin: Eichler, 1840).


LA = The Leibniz-Arnauld Correspondence, ed. and trans. by H. T. Mason (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), cited by pages of G II, which are given in the margins.


PNG = The Principles of Nature and of Grace, cited by section number from the same edition as Mon.


T = Essais de théodicée [Theodicy, 1710] cited from G VI by section number; ‘pd’ and ‘k’, respectively, precede section numbers from the “Preliminary Discourse on the Conformity of Faith with Reason,” and the remarks on Archbishop King’s book on The Origin of Evil; ‘a’ refers to the “Summary (Abrégé) of the Controversy Reduced to Formal Arguments,” as divided by objection numbers.