Leibniz, the Problem of Regret, and the Problem of the Essentially Damned

[Penultimate Copy. Please Cite Published Version.]

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Abstract: The problem of regret is the problem of reconciling the perfect bliss of the blessed in heaven with their desire or wish that things had somehow gone better for the damned. Leibniz's superessentialism, according to which every event that occurs in the life of a person is essential to that person, provides a unique and robust solution to this problem. But it also entails that those who are damned are essentially damned. What could possibly justify God's decision to create such persons? In this paper, I argue that Leibniz's larger metaphysical system has the resources to provide a unique and robust solution to this problem as well.

Keywords: Hell, Regret, Leibniz, Superessentialism, Theodicy

Word Count: 11,752 words (excluding footnotes and references)

I. Introduction

On the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife, heaven and hell are both everlasting and occupied: the blessed enjoy perfect and unending bliss in heaven while the damned experience unending suffering in hell. There are ongoing debates within the Christian tradition concerning how precisely one gains entrance into heaven, but there is general agreement on how one ends up in hell: by virtue of the sins that one has freely committed, or, more generally, by virtue of one's denial, dismissal, or rejection of God. There are also ongoing debates within the Christian tradition about who and how many will end up in heaven and who and how many will end up in hell. However, at least on the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife, both are minimally occupied: there are, or will be, some persons in heaven and some persons in hell.[1]

Many objections have been raised against the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife.[2] Some of them concern the justice or fairness of hell; others concern the compatibility

[1] By the "traditional Christian conception of the afterlife", then, I mean to exclude universalist and annihilationist approaches.
[2] See Walls, 2009 for a nice overview.

of hell with God's perfect love and infinite mercy. One objection that targets the perfect and unending bliss of the blessed in heaven is the problem of eternal separation.[3] How can the blessed in heaven enjoy perfect and unending bliss knowing that there are at least some who are forever separated from them and who experience unending suffering in hell? The problem becomes especially salient when we consider the possibility that the damned might include individuals whom the blessed loved dearly in this life. It seems possible that someone could gain entrance into heaven while her son or daughter, brother or sister, husband or wife could fail to do so. But in such case, would not the realization that that person's loved one is not only not with her in heaven enjoying loving union with God, but also suffering elsewhere, undermine her own perfect bliss?

The problem of eternal separation is often understood as pointing to two related issues. First, there is the fact of separation. That the blessed in heaven are forever separated from those whom they love would seem to make perfect heavenly bliss impossible. Second, there is the awareness of suffering. That the blessed in heaven are aware of the everlasting suffering of their loved ones would seem to make perfect heavenly bliss impossible.

Various solutions to these first two layers of the problem of eternal separation have been proposed.[4] So, for example, it has been proposed that when all is revealed to the blessed in heaven, they will come to learn that the separation and suffering experienced by their loved ones in hell is ultimately self-imposed, or a perfectly just punishment for their freely chosen actions, or the very best that can be hoped for given the choices that their loved ones made throughout their lives. This deeper understanding of the fittingness of the separation and suffering of the damned is meant to provide the requisite consolation. However, even if these solutions to the

[3] See, for example, Reitan, 2002; Hassoun, 2015; Yang, 2018.
[4] See citations in the previous footnote for some helpful surveys of the extant solutions.

first two layers of the problem of eternal separation are successful, there is a third layer of the problem that remains. Even if the blessed in heaven were to come to believe that the separation and suffering of their loved ones in hell is somehow fair or fitting or just given the actual choices and actions of their loved ones, it seems that the blessed in heaven could still desire or wish that their loved ones had somehow acted differently, had somehow made better choices that would have allowed them to gain entrance into heaven and enjoy unending bliss surrounded by those who love them. There are two sides to the sort of regret that the blessed in heaven might experience when reflecting on the state of their beloved damned. First, it seems that the blessed in heaven could regret the specific choices and actions that their loved ones made that led them to their deplorable state. Second, it seems that the blessed in heaven could also desire or wish that they themselves had done more to help their loved ones make better choices. And these unfulfilled desires or wishes, this two-sided regret, would seem to undermine or at least inhibit any kind of perfect and unending bliss that the blessed might hope to enjoy. Call this extra, third layer of the problem of eternal separation the problem of regret.[5]

In this paper, I explore a Leibnizian solution to the problem of regret. I will assume for the sake of argument that standard solutions to the first two layers of the problem of eternal separation are successful (which is to say that I will assume that it can be successfully shown that the suffering of the damned is fair, fitting, and just) and focus on the third layer that remains. Though he never considers the problem of regret as such, Leibniz has within his system the resources to be able to provide a unique and robust solution. The main element in his system that provides for such a solution is his commitment to superessentialism: the thesis that every event that occurs in the life of a person is essential to that person. In brief, if every event that occurs in

[5] The only other discussion of this third layer or aspect of the problem of eternal separation of which I am aware is Bungum, 2023. However, what I am calling the problem of regret is also in some ways similar to what Eleonore Stump calls the "Problem of Mourning" in her 2022.

the life of a person is essential to that person, then it is impossible for any of the blessed in heaven to rationally regret the particular choices and actions that led their loved ones to everlasting damnation. For, in that case, those particular choices and actions are essential to those persons and could not have been otherwise. As I will explain in more detail below, the most significant drawback of this Leibnizian superessentialist solution to the problem of regret is that it entails that those who are damned are essentially damned. If those who are damned are essentially so, what could possibly justify God's decision to create such persons? In the final section of the paper, I argue that Leibniz's larger metaphysical system has the resources to provide a unique and robust solution to this problem as well.

II. Leibniz on Hell

Leibniz accepts the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife.[6] He holds that heaven and hell are both everlasting and occupied. He does, however, think that fewer end up in hell than many of the Christians of his time. So, for example, he finds it hard to believe that unbaptized infants and nonculpable nonbelievers, those who, through no fault of their own, have never heard the Gospel, would end up there.[7] There is evidence to suggest that Leibniz might even be a kind of hopeful universalist. He seems to regard it as possible, for all we know, that all are ultimately saved, though he also argues that positively affirming the universalist position is ill-advised, since it could undermine the urgency of repentance.[8] And so, despite his sympathies for the hopeful universalist position, Leibniz ultimately seems to settle on the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife, which he regards as both coherent and well-motivated.

[6] This is a disputed point among scholars of Leibniz, but I think that there is enough evidence in the texts that we have to suggest that he was at least inclined or strongly motivated to accept the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife. See Strickland, 2009 for an excellent overview of Leibniz's views on hell and eternal damnation and a defense of the traditional interpretation.
[7] See, for example, T, 300 and Grua, 501.
[8] See, for example, A, I, 11, 21, as quoted in Strickland, 2009: p. 311.

In line with the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife, Leibniz holds that whoever ends up in hell is deserving of damnation because of the sins that she has freely committed, because she has freely and defiantly rejected God. And he also holds that whoever ends up in hell is deserving of *everlasting* damnation not because of the seriousness or gravity of any of her sins (as some others had argued[9]), but because of the individual's continuing sinfulness. Leibniz thinks that even after death, the damned continue to sin, they continue to reject God, over and over again without end, and so continue to suffer the consequences for all eternity.[10] As a result, Leibniz regards the everlasting damnation of unrepentant sinners as a fitting, fair, and just outcome. It is worth noting, however, that Leibniz also espouses a freedom model of hell, according to which God does not cast sinners into hell, but rather, sinners freely choose to separate themselves from God.[11] This state of separation, and the suffering that comes with it, is just what hell is, and so whoever freely puts himself in such a state is thereby in hell. Finally, Leibniz also espouses a natural consequence model of the punishment of hell, according to which God does not punish the damned with unending suffering, but rather, the separation and suffering that they experience is the natural result of the choices they have freely made and the sorts of persons that they have made themselves to be.[12]

Leibniz never quite considers the problem of eternal separation, at least not as I have formulated it here. But, given his commitment to the justice of everlasting separation and suffering for unrepentant sinners and his espousal of the freedom and natural consequence

[9] The standard proposal along these lines is that the damned are deserving of an infinite punishment despite the fact that the sins for which they are being punished are finite in number and duration because the object of their sins, God, is both infinitely good and infinitely loving. See Walls, 2009: p. 494 for a discussion of this point with references to those within the Christian tradition who have argued for this claim.
[10] See, for example, T, 162; T, 205; T, 290-291; Grua, 249; CP, 81, 83, 93; LGR, 326.
[11] This latter claim often accompanies the previous claim that it is the continuing sinfulness of the damned that keeps them there, which suggests that Leibniz sees the two as closely connected. And so, many of the citations in previous footnote provide evidence for both.
[12] See, for example, CP, 35, CP, 37; CP, 53; CP, 83. See Strickland, 2009: pp. 314-315 for a discussion of this feature of his account.

models of hell, Leibniz has the resources to be able to provide something like the standard solution to the problem, according to which the blessed in heaven come to learn that the separation and suffering experienced by their loved ones in hell is both self-imposed and a perfectly just punishment for their freely chosen actions and so in no way an impediment to their own perfect and unending bliss in heaven. With respect to the problem of regret, while Leibniz never quite considers this particular problem either, at least not as I have formulated it here[13], he has within his system the resources to be able to provide a unique and robust solution. The main element in his system that serves as the foundation for this solution is his commitment to superessentialism.

III. What is Superessentialism?

Superessentialism is the view that every property possessed by a substance is an essential property of that substance.[14] Importantly, it is not the view that every property that you possess right now is a property that you have always had and will always have. It is not the view that substances never undergo any sort of change in any of their properties. Rather, it is the view that, for any property that you possess at any time, it is essential to you that you possess that particular property at that particular time. If we understand an event as the possession of a property by a substance at a time, then we can state the thesis of superessentialism more clearly in terms of events: every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to her, every decision that she makes, and every action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. According to superessentialism, it is metaphysically impossible for a person to have lived a life that is in any way different from the one that she

[13] Leibniz does consider a similar problem from the perspective of the damned: could they not regret their own choices that led them to their eternal damnation? Leibniz's most detailed discussion of this issue is found in his *Confessio Philosophi*, at 105 and 107. I say more about this passage below.

[14] We owe the name for this sort of view to the seminal work of Fabrizio Mondadori (see his 1973, 1975, 1985, and 1993).

actually lived. And this is so because persons are defined by their life histories. For every possible difference in any person's life history, there is another person (possible or actual) whose life is essentially constituted in precisely that way. So, whenever we try to think about how our lives could have gone differently, whenever we seem to imagine ourselves making different choices or taking advantage of different opportunities or avoiding certain tragedies, we are not actually thinking about or imagining different versions of our own lives. We are thinking about or imagining the lives of other persons (possible or actual) who are similar to, but in fact numerically distinct from, ourselves.

Superessentialism is neither the same as, nor by itself entails, a nearby view known as necessitarianism, according to which every event that occurs does so necessarily, that nothing in the history of the universe could have gone differently than it in fact did. Superessentialism claims only that every event in your life is essential to you, that nothing in your life could have gone differently without swapping you out for someone else. It does not claim that you exist necessarily. According to superessentialism, the particular events that constitute your life are conditionally necessary: if you exist, then, necessarily those particular events occur. But they are not absolutely necessary, since you could have failed to exist. Now, if you exist, then it might also follow that necessarily, several other persons exist as well. For, if certain events in your life essentially include certain other persons, and the participation in those events is essential to the lives of those persons, then necessarily, if you exist, then those other people exist too. One might worry that this result will have a cascading effect: if your existence entails the existence of certain other people, and the existence of those people entails the existence of certain other people as well, does not your existence entail the existence of absolutely everyone else? And so, would not a kind of necessitarianism follow after all? On the contrary, it might be that you and

any other persons who play an essential role in the events of your life come as package deals: none of you can exist without any of the others. But it is perfectly consistent with this claim to say that some other package could have existed instead of this one, or perhaps no package at all. And so, for that reason, superessentialism does not by itself entail necessitarianism.[15]

IV. Leibniz on Superessentialism

Leibniz arrives at superessentialism by way of his theory of complete individual concepts.[16] According to Leibniz, packed into the very idea or concept of each individual person is the entire history of his or her life: every event that will take place, every decision that he or she will make, every action that he or she will perform, every property that he or she will ever possess, down to the smallest detail. As Leibniz explains,

> The complete or perfect notion of an individual substance contains all of its predicates, past, present, and future. For certainly it is now true that a future predicate will be, and so it is contained in the notion of a thing. And thus everything that will happen to Peter or Judas, both necessary and free, is contained in the perfect individual notion of Peter or Judas, considered in the realm of possibility by withdrawing the mind from the divine decree for creating him, and is seen there by God. (AG, 32)

> the nature of an individual substance or of a complete being is to have a notion so complete that it is sufficient to contain and to allow us to deduce from it all the predicates of the subject to which this notion is attributed… God, seeing Alexander's individual notion or haecceity, sees in it at the same time the basis and reason for all the predicates which can be said truly of him, for example, that he vanquished Darius and Porus; he even knows a priori (and not by experience) whether he died a natural death or whether he was poisoned, something we can know only through history. (AG, 41)

Why does Leibniz hold this view? According to Leibniz, for every possible series of events that could unfold in a person's life, there is some possible person, a person whom God could have

[15] However, as we will see, there are other aspects of Leibniz's metaphysical system that do seem to entail a kind of necessitarianism. I discuss these aspects below. Here I mean only to point out that superessentialism by itself does not imply or entail any kind of necessitarianism.

[16] What follows is what we might call the standard or classical interpretation of Leibniz on this issue. This is the interpretation championed by Mondadori, for example (see citations in footnote 14 above). It should be noted, however, that not everyone thinks that Leibniz is committed to superessentialism, or that his account of complete individual concepts commits him to that thesis. See, for example, Garcia Torres, 2024 for an alternative interpretation, with citations to others on both sides of the debate.

chosen to create, whose life is composed of just those events. This means that there are possible persons whose lives are very different from your own, but also that there are possible persons whose lives are very similar to your own. Indeed, it seems possible that, for every event in your life, there could have existed some other person whose life was exactly the same as yours with the exception of that one event. If that is true, then the only way of picking you out from all of those other, possible persons, the only way of specifying that God has chosen to create you rather than some other possible person whom he could have created, is to make reference to the entire sequence of events that comprise your life. As Leibniz explains, using the example of Adam, the very first human person, anything less than that entire sequence is insufficient to distinguish you from all other resembling possible persons who could have existed in your stead:

> When one considers in Adam a part of his predicates, for example, that he is the first man, set in a garden of pleasure, from whose side God fashioned a woman, and similar things conceived *sub ratione generalitatis*, in a general way (that is to say, without naming Eve, Paradise, and other circumstances that fix individuality), and when one calls Adam the person to whom these predicates are attributed, all this is not sufficient to determine the individual, for there can be an infinity of Adams, that is, an infinity of possible persons, different from one another, whom this fits. Far from disagreeing with what Arnauld says against this multiplicity of the same individual, I myself used this to make it better understood that the nature of an individual must be complete and determinate. I am even quite convinced of what Saint Thomas had already taught about intelligences, which I hold to apply generally, namely, that it is not possible for there to be two individuals entirely alike, or differing only numerically. Therefore, we must not conceive of a vague Adam, that is, a person to whom certain attributes of Adam belong, when we are concerned with determining whether all human events follow from his assumption; rather, we must attribute to him a notion so complete that everything that can be attributed to him can be deduced from it. Now, there is no room for doubting that God can form such a notion of him, or rather that he finds it already formed in the realm of possibles, that is, in his understanding. It, therefore, also follows that he would not have been our Adam, but another Adam, had other events happened to him, for nothing prevents us from saying that he would be another. Therefore, he is another. (LA, 45-46)[17]

[17] This is a running example that Leibniz uses throughout his correspondence with Arnaud (see, for example, LA, 16 and LA, 60-61). See also his discussion of an infinite number of possible "Sextuses" at T, 370-371 and his discussion of Peter at LGR, 256-257, 258-259, and 260-261.

From Leibniz's theory of complete individual concepts, a commitment to superessentialism follows almost immediately. For if the very concept or idea of any particular person includes the entire sequence of events that comprise his or her life, then it follows that any alteration in any of those events would constitute a change in person. Leibniz explicitly affirms this result in several places:

> if in the life of some person and even in this entire universe something were to proceed in a different way from what it does, nothing would prevent us saying that it would be another person or another possible universe that God would have chosen. It would thus truly be another individual. (LA, 59-60)

> But someone else will say, why is it that this man will assuredly commit this sin? The reply is easy: otherwise it would not be this man. For God sees from all time that there will be a certain Judas whose notion or idea (which God has) contains this free and future action. Therefore only this question remains, why does such a Judas, the traitor, who is merely possible in God's idea, actually exist? (AG, 61)

> You will object that it is possible for you to ask why God did not give you more strength than he has. I answer: if he had done that, you would not exist, for he would have produced not you but another creature. (Grua, 327/A, VI, 4, 1639)[18]

According to Leibniz, then, every event in the life of a person is essential to that person, such that had any event in the life of that person been in any way different, then that particular person would not have existed: some numerically distinct person with a very similar life would have existed instead. Every detail of a person's life is built into their complete individual concept. Every detail is an essential part of what makes that person the particular person that he or she is.

Leibniz also thinks that every object in the universe is inextricably linked to every other object, such that any change in any object would result in a real change in every other object. Support for this conclusion comes from his "mirror thesis", the thesis that every object in the universe (or more precisely, every monad) is a kind of mirror, reflecting from its unique perspective the state of every other object in the universe at that time. Any change in any object

[18] As quoted in Cover and O'Leary-Hawthorne, 1999: p. 92.

in the universe would alter the reflection, and so produce a change, in every other object. What this means is that the complete individual concept of each object essentially includes reference to every other object in the universe that it occupies.[19]

When combined with his superessentialism, the view that all things are essentially interconnected gives rise to the following inference: the only way that any event in your life could have gone differently is if God had decided to create someone other than you. And the only way that God could have decided to create someone other than you is if he were to create an entirely different world with entirely different creatures with different features in a different arrangement. Hence, the only way that any event in your life could have gone differently is if God had decided to create an entirely different world with entirely different creatures with different features in a different arrangement. It turns out, then, that Leibniz does in fact accept the corollary to superessentialism mentioned above: persons come in package deals. God must choose between creating all of us or creating none of us.

> it must be known that all things are connected in each one of the possible worlds: the universe, whatever it may be, is all of one piece, like an ocean: the least movement extends its effect there to any distance whatsoever, even though this effect become less perceptible in proportion to the distance. Therein God has ordered all things beforehand once for all, having foreseen prayers, good and bad actions, and all the rest; and each thing as an idea has contributed, before its existence, to the resolution that has been made upon the existence of all things; so that nothing can be changed in the universe (any more than in a number) save its essence or if you will, save its numerical individuality. (T, 128-129)

In Leibniz's system, then, every event in the life of a person is essential to that person. If God chooses to create some particular person, then, necessarily, every one of the events that comprises his or her life occurs. And, since every person in any given world is essentially connected to every other person in that world, if God chooses to create some particular person in some particular world, then, necessarily, every one of the other people in that world are created

[19] See, for example, AG, 42.

as well. Combining those two claims, we reach the following result: For any person whom God could choose to create, if he chooses to create that person, then, necessarily, every other person in that world is also created and, necessarily, every event in the life of every one of those other people occurs. At this point, Leibniz's system is bound to strike many of us as deeply fatalistic. However, even with everything we have so far, his system still falls short of the full-blown necessitarianism of Spinoza, a system from which Leibniz was very careful to distance himself throughout his career. According to Leibniz, though all of the creatures of this world are essentially bound to one another, and though each of the events in each of the lives of each of those creatures is essentially bound to every other event in that life, there is still nothing about the actual world that necessitates its existence. Considered in itself, the actual world could have failed to exist and any other possible world could have taken its place. And so, while it follows from God's creation of any particular world that all of the events that comprise that world necessarily occur, which world, and so which creatures, he decides to create remains, in itself, contingent.[20]

V. Leibniz on Human Freedom

Leibniz thinks that his superessentialism not only successfully avoids necessitarianism, but also that it is perfectly compatible with human freedom. For Leibniz, there are three basic requirements for acting freely: spontaneity, intelligence, and contingency.[21] By spontaneity, Leibniz means that any free agent must be the source or cause of her own actions. She cannot be forced or coerced into acting. By intelligence, Leibniz means that any free agent must deliberate, or be capable of deliberating, before acting. She must perceive and evaluate the various courses of action available to her and select from among those courses of action based on that evaluation.

[20] See, for example, AG, 20-21; AG, 94; AG, 193-195; CP, 57.
[21] The central text here is T, 303, but see also T, 143 and LGR, 297.

What Leibniz means by the contingency requirement for free choice is an ongoing source of debate among interpreters.[22] But we can start by pointing out that Leibniz has a very strict account of necessity.[23] A proposition or state of affairs is necessary if and only if its opposite implies or entails a contradiction. A proposition or state of affairs is impossible if and only if it implies or entails a contradiction. A proposition or state of affairs is possible if and only if it does not imply or entail a contradiction. And a proposition or state of affairs is contingent if and only if it is true or obtains but its opposite does not imply or entail a contradiction. Leibniz thinks that whenever I choose some particular course of action in some particular set of circumstances, my choice is contingent and not necessary because its opposite, my choosing some other course of action in those circumstances, does not by itself imply or entail a contradiction, at least not without bringing in or assuming some other facts or principles.[24]

Notice, however, what is not included in Leibniz's three requirements for acting freely. Leibniz does not think that it must be possible for the agent to actually do otherwise in the very same circumstances possessing all of the very same reasons for action. Indeed, there are places in which Leibniz seems to suggest that this is straightforwardly impossible. Leibniz rejects what he calls the "principle of indifference with equipoise", the claim that it is possible for some agent, in the very same set of circumstances and with the very same set of reasons for acting, to do otherwise than she does.[25] And this rejection is motivated not by his commitment to superessentialism but by his commitment to the principle of sufficient reason. Leibniz thinks that no rational agent acts without sufficient reason. If a rational agent were presented with equally

[22] See McDonough, 2021 for a helpful overview of the debate.
[23] See, for example, AG, 193; T, 298-299.
[24] See, for example, AG, 194-195; T, 143; T, 303; T, 346-347; CP, 53, 55. What I am articulating here is the "Per Se Solution" to the problem of contingency in Leibniz found especially in his earlier works. Not many are convinced that this solution is successful, or even that Leibniz himself remained committed to it over the course of his whole career. But it does seem to preserve at least a minimal degree of contingency in human action. See McDonaugh, 2021, and Flint, 2025 for more on this and other solutions to the problem of contingency in Leibniz.
[25] See, for example, T, 203; T, 236; T, 309-310; AG, 194-195.

powerful reasons for two competing courses of action, and no reasons at all for any other courses of action, she would simply be incapable of choosing. And in any situation in which a rational agent is presented with better reasons for performing one course of action than some other, she will, without fail, choose the former and not the latter. And so, according to Leibniz, any rational agent will always proceed with the course of action that appears to her to be the best. Even in those cases in which we are influenced by instinct or emotion, our instincts and emotions do not typically cause us to act against our best reasons, but rather, they condition our reasons, making certain options appear better than they otherwise would have.[26] In what sense, then, are my free choices contingent? How could it be the case that my actions are anything less than necessary, given that I always proceed with the course of action that appears to me to be the best? Recall that, according to Leibniz, a proposition or state of affairs is contingent if and only if it is true or obtains but its opposite does not imply or entail a contradiction. As I explained above, Leibniz thinks that whenever I choose some particular course of action in some particular set of circumstances, my choice is contingent and not necessary because its opposite, my choosing some other course of action in those circumstances, does not by itself imply or entail a contradiction. A contradiction only arises once we also add in the truth of the principle of sufficient reason. According to Leibniz, that my choosing some other course of action in any specific set of circumstances does not by itself imply or entail a contradiction is sufficient to make my action contingent (or, at the very least, extrinsically necessary rather than absolutely or per se necessary).

It is significant that Leibniz does not regard the possibility of actually doing otherwise as a requirement for free choice, because his commitment to superessentialism would seem to force

[26] See, for example, AG, 194-195. This is a bit of an oversimplification. Leibniz seems to think that, in some cases, our instincts, emotions, and passions can overpower our reason, thus minimizing, if not altogether eliminating, any responsibility we have for our actions. See Garcia Torres, 2022 for more on this.

him to abandon that requirement anyway. If superessentialism is true, then it seems that we are not free in the sense of having alternative possibilities, either at the moment of decision or at any earlier moment in our lives. For, any particular choice that I make is essential to me; it is a part of what makes me the particular person that I am. If I were to somehow do otherwise than what is contained in my complete individual concept, then it would turn out that I am not the particular person who I am, which is impossible.

On the other hand, there are several places in which Leibniz insists that agents do maintain the power to do otherwise whenever they perform a voluntary action for which they are morally responsible. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, for example, he says, "absolutely speaking, the will is in a state of indifference, as opposed to one of necessity, and it has the power to do otherwise or even to suspend its action completely; these two alternatives are possible and remain so" (AG, 61). And, in the *Theodicy,* he puts it this way: "the certain determination to sin which exists in man does not deprive him of the power to avoid sinning (speaking generally) or, since he does sin, prevent him from being guilty and deserving punishment" (T, 346-347). How are we to reconcile these passages with Leibniz's commitment to both the principle of sufficient reason and superessentialism?

Here is one way of reconciling these claims. By virtue of possessing an intellect and a will, I possess the power to do many things. I have the power to perform actions of great kindness, actions of unspeakable evil, and a whole host of actions in between the two. Indeed, by virtue of possessing an intellect and a will, every human agent possesses these powers. But I also possess various powers and features that not everyone else has, powers and features that are specific to me. Some of my powers are assisted or augmented by these other features that I possess. But some of my powers are masked or hindered or thwarted by these other features. For

example, I possess the power to give myself an injection, and so in some sense I can do so, but my crippling fear of needles prevents me from doing so, which means that in some sense I cannot do so (at least not without assistance). I possess the power to hand my sister over to a vicious drug cartel in exchange for a nickel, and so in some sense I can do so, but my love for her prevents me from ever doing so, which means that in some sense I cannot do so. I simply cannot imagine myself handing over my sister to a vicious drug cartel, especially not for a mere nickel. What these examples show is that it is possible to possess the power to do something even if there are other factors that make it the case that the agent will not and cannot ever actualize this power. And if those factors are, as superessentialism holds, essential features of the agent, such that the agent could not have failed to possess them, then it will follow that in some sense the agent maintains the power to perform the relevant action even if there is no possible scenario in which she does. There is at least one passage in which Leibniz himself seems to articulate something like this solution. In the *Theodicy* he states:

> But after this life…there is always in the man who sins, even when he is damned, a freedom which renders him culpable, and a power, albeit remote, of recovering himself, even though it should never pass into action. And there is no reason why one may not say that this degree of freedom, exempt from necessity, but not exempt from certainty, remains in the damned as well as in the blessed. (T, 269)

It is, then, possible to interpret Leibniz in such a way that our actions turn out to be free, contingent, and within our power, even if we also accept both the principle of sufficient reason and superessentialism.[27]

[27] My interpretation of Leibniz on the contingency of human action and the power to do otherwise is in part inspired by the Lewisian account found in Armstrong, 2017. More difficult for this sort of interpretation are those passages (such as T, 145) in which Leibniz maintains that "there is no obligation to do that which is impossible in our existing state". Here I would once again fall back on the two solutions that I have presented in this section of the paper. On any occasion in which I act freely, my choosing to perform some other action in those very circumstances does not in itself imply or entail a contradiction (at least not without also bringing in the truth of the principle of sufficient reason or my complete individual concept). It is not *per se* impossible that I perform such an action. I also at that time possess the relevant power to perform the alternative action, and so in that sense it is not impossible for me to do otherwise, even if there are other factors that make it the case that I cannot actually perform that alternative action. See Garcia Torres, 2022 for a more detailed discussion of this issue as well.

To sum up, Leibniz's superessentialism is neither the same as, nor by itself entails, any kind of necessitarianism. It is also compatible with a certain understanding of free will and even a certain understanding of the power to do otherwise. Importantly, however, it does seem incompatible with any conception of free will which insists on a strong form of the principle of alternative possibilities. And this will be crucial for my Leibnizian solution to the problem of regret, to which I now turn.

VI. Leibniz and the Problem of Regret

Now that I have discussed the key aspects of Leibniz's superessentialism (what it is and what it is not, what it does and does not entail, how it is compatible with a certain kind of freedom and incompatible with another, and why Leibniz thinks that superessentialism is true), let us now return to the problem of regret. Earlier I described the problem of eternal separation as follows: how could the blessed in heaven enjoy perfect bliss knowing that there are others, perhaps even some whom they knew and loved in this life, who are forever separated from them and who are experiencing unending suffering in hell? Would not knowing that their loved ones are forever separated from them, and forever in a state of suffering, undermine or inhibit the perfect and uninterrupted happiness of the blessed? I described the problem of regret as an additional layer to the problem, one that goes beyond the actual separation and suffering of the damned: even if the blessed in heaven come to understand and agree that the separation and suffering that their loved ones experience in hell is self-imposed, perfectly just, or the best that can be hoped for, it seems that they could still wish that those loved ones had somehow made better decisions that would have allowed them to gain entrance into heaven and enjoy unending bliss surrounded by those that love them. It seems that even if the blessed in heaven could somehow come to terms with the separation and suffering of their loved ones, they could still

regret the decisions and actions that led their loved ones to their deplorable state. It seems that they could still wish that things had gone differently for their separated and suffering loved ones.

Here it might be helpful to pause and briefly discuss the nature of regret. The view of regret operative in this paper is one according to which, regret, unlike some other nearby emotions or negative reactive attitudes, possesses an essential counterfactual element. To regret is to wish or desire that things had been otherwise. The proper object of regret is a state of affairs or series of states of affairs. To regret a state of affairs or series of states of affairs is to desire or wish that that state of affairs or series of states of affairs had not occurred and that some other state of affairs or series of states of affairs had occurred instead. On this account, I can regret certain states of affairs that were within my power to make otherwise (such as my having made a particular choice or performed a particular action) and I can also regret states of affairs that were not within my power to make otherwise but still seem like they could have been otherwise (such as the Buffalo Bills' having suffered another heartbreaking playoff loss). It follows from this account of regret that I cannot rationally regret what I know, or believe, or have good reason to believe, cannot be otherwise. And this is so because regret is a kind of wish or desire. It seems plausible to suppose that any wish or desire for what one knows, or believes, or has good reason to believe, is impossible is irrational. For example, it seems irrational to wish or desire that two had been an odd number or that I could someday become a married bachelor.[28] As a result, if one were to come to learn that some unfortunate state of affairs could not have been otherwise, one

[28] Could one not desire or wish that what is in fact impossible were not impossible? That will depend on the sort of impossibility involved. I can certainly desire or wish that what is physically impossible were not impossible (for example, I might desire or wish that human beings could fly by flapping their arms). But I do not think that I can desire or wish that what I know, or believe, or have good reason to believe, to be logically or metaphysically impossible were not impossible. For what is logically or metaphysically impossible is necessarily impossible; it could not have been possible. To desire or wish that the number three had somehow been greater than the number four is an irrational desire or wish. Such a desire or wish is simply incoherent. This is not to say that it is psychologically impossible to form such a desire or wish, only that any such desire or wish would be irrational.

might persist in various other negative emotions or reactive attitudes with respect to that state of affairs,[29] but regret no longer seems like an appropriate or rational response.[30]

Here it might be helpful to distinguish between subjective and objective rationality. It can be *subjectively* rational to regret what in fact cannot be otherwise as long as I do not know, or believe, or have good reason to believe, that it cannot be otherwise. For, in that case, I am wishing or desiring for something that is consistent with what I believe. However, it cannot be *objectively* rational to regret what in fact cannot be otherwise. For, in that case, I am wishing or desiring for some state of affairs that necessarily cannot obtain. For example, if, having learned of its chemical composition but not having read *Naming and Necessity*, I come to regret that this sample of water in front of me is composed of hydrogen and oxygen and wish that it were not so, my regret could be subjectively rational depending on my evidence. It might be rational to regret the chemical composition of this sample of water given what I know, or believe, or have reason to believe. However, if it is true that water is essentially composed of hydrogen and oxygen, then whenever I form such a regret, that regret is objectively irrational. I am wishing or desiring for something that I do not realize is impossible. And once I have read *Naming and Necessity* (and am convinced by the arguments therein), I now know that water is essentially composed of hydrogen and oxygen and cannot be otherwise. And so now it is no longer subjectively rational

[29] So, for example, one might lament, mourn, grieve, or otherwise recognize as bad something that could not have been otherwise, at least insofar as these other emotions or negative reactive attitudes do not similarly include an essential counterfactual element. More controversially, I also think that one can feel guilt, shame, and embarrassment about a state of affairs that includes some bad action for which one is responsible, even if one could not have avoided performing that action. However, due the essentially counterfactual nature of regret, I do not think that one can rationally regret what one knows, or believes, or has good reason to believe, cannot be otherwise.

[30] What about a mathematician who is excited about the possibility that she has just discovered a new prime number, only to be disappointed to learn that the number is in fact not prime? Could she not regret the fact the number is in fact not prime? Presumably, if a number is prime it is necessarily so and could not have been otherwise. So how do we explain our mathematician's regret in this case? What I think is going on in these sorts of cases is that the individuals involved do not actually regret the relevant necessary truth. Our mathematician does not come to regret the fact that the number that she has discovered is not prime. Rather, I think that the individuals involved come to regret various things about themselves: that they did not actually discover a new prime number, or that they made a mistake, or that they wasted their time, or that they got excited over nothing. In short, they regret that they did not make better choices, or have better insights, or spend their time in better, more productive ways.

for me to persist in that regret. The relevant wish or desire is no longer consistent with what I believe.

Having settled on a working account of regret, let us now return to the problem of regret. I would like to propose that Leibniz's superessentialism provides a unique and robust solution. Recall, that, according to superessentialism, every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to her, every decision that she makes, and every action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. But if every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to her, every decision that she makes, and every action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity (and I know, or believe, or have good reason to believe, that this is the case), then it follows that, looking back on the life of any of my loved ones who end up hell, I cannot rationally wish or desire that things had gone differently for that person, that she had made different, better decisions and so ended up in heaven instead. For, if superessentialism is true, then those particular decisions that led one's beloved to reject God and so spend the rest of eternity suffering in hell are essential to that person, are constitutive of that person's identity.[31]

[31] Indeed, it follows from Leibniz's superessentialism that once I know, or believe, or have good reason to believe, the relevant truths about the rigid identity conditions of my loved ones, I cannot rationally wish or desire that any event in their lives had been in any way different, at least not while holding fixed their identities. Does that mean that, according to superessentialism, any regret I could possibly have about my own life or the lives of my loved ones will turn out to be irrational? Once again, regrets of this sort can be subjectively rational as long as I do not yet know, or believe, or have good reason to believe, that superessentialism is true. And they will be objectively irrational only if my regret involves holding fixed the identities of the relevant persons. It is possible, on this model, to desire or wish that certain events in our lives had gone differently, but in so doing we would also be desiring or wishing that the relevant persons had never existed but some other similar persons had existed instead. (I explore this sort of regret in more detail below). In line with a suggestion that I made in a footnote above, even if superessentialism is true and I know or believe it to be true, it is still possible for me to lament, mourn, grieve, or otherwise recognize as bad, certain events in my own life or in the lives of my loved ones, despite the fact that they could not have been otherwise, because these other emotions or negative reactive attitudes do not include the same counterfactual element characteristic of regret. However, one might wonder: if there are other negative emotions or reactive attitudes that can be maintained even after coming to know or believe that superessentialism is true, could not these other negative emotions or reactive attitudes undermine or inhibit the perfect and unending bliss of the blessed in heaven, even if regret is no longer rational or appropriate? I would argue that if standard solutions to the first two layers of the problem of eternal separation are successful, then they will successfully address many of these other negative emotions or reactive attitudes. It is only regret, with its counterfactual core, that is in principle immune to these strategies, and which requires something stronger, such as superessentialism.

According to superessentialism, if one were to try to imagine how things could have gone differently in the life of one's beloved and wish that they had gone that way instead, what one would actually be imagining is how the life of someone else, very similar to one's beloved, would have gone, and what one would actually be wishing for is that one's beloved had never existed and that someone else, very similar to one's beloved, had existed instead. And that seems like a very different sort of wish, a very different sort of desire from the one with which we began. It would seem strange when faced with the suffering of a loved one to respond by wishing that she had never existed (though I explore this possibility in more detail below). For then one would never have had any of the meaningful experiences with that person that would make her separation and suffering in hell particularly difficult to reconcile with one's blissful state in heaven. And it would also seem strange when faced with the suffering of a loved one to respond by wishing that some other person, someone very much like one's beloved, had existed instead of her. For many of our relationships, numerical identity seems to matter. It seems to matter to me that the woman whom I embrace is my mother and not just someone very much like her. If someone were to offer to replace my mother with someone very much like my mother but who endures less suffering in her life, it is not at all clear to me that I should accept that offer. For, in that case, I would not be reducing my mother's suffering, nor would I be producing a state of affairs in which I am able to spend more time with her. I would simply be replacing her with someone else who suffers less and with whom I am able to spend more time.[32] As a result, if superessentialism is true, then one cannot consistently wish that the life of one's beloved who is separated and suffering in hell had gone differently for her. For when all is revealed to the

[32] Here I am relying on some rather strong anti-Parfitian intuitions on personal identity and what we care about. Famously, Derek Parfit argues that numerical identity is not really what we care about when it comes to our own identity and the identities of those whom we love (see Parfit, 1984). My argument here assumes that Parfit is wrong about this.

blessed in heaven, one will come to learn that, necessarily, it could not have been in any way different for that person. And knowing that fact will make any such regrets among the blessed both objectively and subjectively irrational.[33]

When the blessed in heaven come to learn of the separation and suffering of their beloved damned, and when they come to learn that this is the only way that any of the lives of those particular persons could have gone, it still seems possible that the blessed in heaven could be so struck by the deplorable state of their beloved damned that they might come to regret not just the separation and suffering of their loved ones, but their very existence. The blessed in heaven might be so struck by the deplorable state of their beloved damned that they might wish that their loved ones had never existed at all. But notice that, according to Leibniz's superessentialism, it is not possible for the blessed to wish that *only* their suffering loved ones had never existed. Recall that, in Leibniz's system, if you exist, then necessarily, several other persons exist. For, if certain events in your life essentially include certain other persons, and the participation in those events is essential to the lives of those persons, then necessarily, if you exist, then those other persons exist too. The reverse also holds. If you had never existed, then necessarily, many other persons would have never existed either. Indeed, any persons that made even the slightest impact on your life, and any persons for whom you made even the slightest impact on theirs, would necessarily fail to exist if you did. As I explained above, Leibniz believes that we come as package deals. What is contingent is not your existence in particular, but the existence of the metaphysical package that our intertwining lives compose.[34] And so, while it is consistent with

[33] Once again, it may still be psychologically possible for the blessed in heaven to persist in that regret. It certainly seems that we are capable of thinking irrational thoughts and harboring irrational desires. But once it has been made known to them that their regret is unreasonable, it is plausible to suppose that any such regrets in the blessed will fade over time.

[34] Earlier I explained that Leibniz reaches this conclusion by combining his "mirror thesis", the view that every object in the universe is a kind of mirror, reflecting from its unique perspective the state of every other object in the universe, with his superessentialism. But I also argued that we can reach the same conclusion as long as we accept both superessentialism and the more modest claim that the events that essentially constitute the lives of any

superessentialism for the blessed in heaven to regret the existence of their separated and suffering loved ones, to wish that they had never existed at all, the only way that they can consistently hold that regret or make that wish is to regret the existence of everyone else, to wish that none of us had ever existed, including the blessed themselves. And that sort of regret is far different from the sort of regret with which we began. I think that that sort of regret would only make sense if one found the world to be so irredeemably corrupt that no part of it was worth saving.[35]

Leibniz's superessentialism, then, provides the resources for a unique and robust solution to the problem of regret. Any possible regrets that the blessed in heaven could have concerning the unending suffering of their loved ones in hell, any desire that they might have that the lives of their loved ones had somehow turned out differently, would be literally self-undermining. If superessentialism is true, then in order to be consistent, the blessed would have to regret not only the existence of their loved ones but their own existence and the existence of everyone with whom they have ever come in contact. And, in that case, they would be regretting the existence of absolutely everything they care about, absolutely everything they value. And it is hard to see that as a rational desire or as a desire fitting for the blessed in heaven. It is one thing to be willing to sacrifice one's own life to prevent the suffering of a loved one, but to be willing to sacrifice the life and happiness of absolutely everyone else is another thing entirely.

Leibniz himself comes very close to seeing this theological upshot of his commitment to superessentialism. Consider, for example, the following passage from his *Confessio*:

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particular persons always make reference to at least some other particular persons. For, in that case, if the events that essentially constitute the lives of those other particular persons also make reference to at least some other particular persons, and so on, then, it is plausible to suggest that, through a long and complex series of referential links, every person in the universe will be essentially connected to every other person.

[35] Charles Joshua Horn emphasizes this upshot of Leibniz's superessentialism in his 2017.

> I parried the arguments of those who were indignant that God did not eliminate Adam and Eve from the world at once when they first sinned (so that their stain would not be propagated to their posterity) and that God did not substitute others better than they were. For I have drawn attention to the fact that if God had done that, sin having been taken away, an entirely different series of things, entirely different combinations of circumstances, persons, and marriages, and entirely different persons would have been produced and, consequently, sin having been taken away or extinguished, they themselves would not have existed. They therefore have no reason to be indignant that Adam and Eve sinned and, much less, that God permitted sin to occur, since they must rather credit their own existence to God's tolerance of those very sins. You see to what extent men vex themselves with vain questions. It is as though someone of half-noble birth were irritated with his father because he had married a woman unequal in rank (although men do not lack similar feelings, or even more foolish ones), not thinking that if his father had married someone else, not he, but some other man, would have come into the world. (CP 105-107)

Here Leibniz is discussing the irrationality of the damned wishing or desiring that things had gone differently for them. But it applies equally well to the blessed and any wishes or desires or regrets they might have concerning the damned.

VII. Leibniz and the Problem of the Essentially Damned

The most significant drawback of the Leibnizian superessentialist solution to the problem of regret proposed in the previous section is that it gives rise to another, potentially more serious problem. It follows from Leibniz's superessentialism that every person who ends up in hell is *essentially* damned: it is part of their identity that they freely reject God and so suffer in hell for all eternity. But if every one of the damned turns out to be essentially damned, if not even God could have saved these persons, why would God choose to create them? Indeed, it would seem particularly cruel for God to create any person knowing for certain that she will, after a short time on earth, spend the rest of eternity suffering in hell. Call this fourth layer of the problem of eternal separation the problem of the essentially damned.

It is worth noting that one does not have to be committed to superessentialism, Leibnizian or otherwise, for something like the problem of the essentially damned to arise. The problem is

worsened if the damned turn out to be essentially damned, but a version of the problem will arise for anyone who accepts the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife and who also holds that, prior to creation, God has perfect foreknowledge of every event that will unfold in any world that he is considering creating. For, even if there are other possible worlds in which the damned are saved (and so none of them is essentially damned), if God knows with certainty that in this particular world those individuals will be damned, we can still ask why he would create this particular world in light of his knowledge of that fact. Whether the damned are essentially damned, then, or merely certainly damned, there is a problem here concerning God's decision to create such persons. Only in the case that the damned are contingently damned and God does not know, prior to creating them, whether they will end up damned or saved, is the problem avoided. For, in that case, God does not create any person knowing that he or she will essentially or even certainly be damned. He creates every person with the real possibility that she might be saved.

What, then, could possibly justify God's decision to create the essentially (or certainly) damned? Here too I think that Leibniz has the resources in his system to be able to provide a unique and robust solution to the problem. Leibniz holds that the world that we currently occupy is the best of all possible worlds.[36] He arrives at this conclusion, not by observation or a comprehensive review of all of the available evidence, but by reflecting a priori on the nature of God. God is supremely perfect, having every possible perfection. This means that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly rational. Now, before creation, when God is considering whether and what to create, He is presented with an infinite array of possible worlds, understood as compossible sets of possible objects and arrangements. Now, because God is omniscient, He knows which of these possible worlds would be the best and what He would have to do to create it. Because God is omnipotent, he is able to create any of these possible worlds without fail. And

[36] For a helpful overview of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theodicy, see Murray, 2016.

because God is perfectly rational, he never acts without sufficient reason, which is to say that he always chooses the best, most optimal course of action. From God's perfect knowledge, perfect power, and perfect rationality, then, it follows that God chooses to create the best of all possible worlds. Indeed, it would seem to follow from these assumptions that God must create the best of all possible worlds, that, in some sense, he cannot do otherwise.[37]

Now, what makes some possible world better than another, and what would make one possible world the best? Leibniz proposes that worlds can be evaluated and ranked based on two key features: their diversity and their unity.[38] A more diverse world, one with a wider array of creatures and features, better captures the infinite perfection of God, and a more unified world, one with simplicity, consistency, and coherence, better reflects the simplicity, consistency, and intelligence of its creator. Leibniz explains that the best possible world is one that maximizes, to the highest degree possible, both of these features, or rather, one that achieves the greatest possible balance or harmony between them.

Notice that nothing about Leibniz's characterization of the best of all possible worlds entails that such a world would be completely absent of any kind of suffering, death, or hardship.

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[37] In his later work, Leibniz describes the sort of necessity involved here as a kind of "moral necessity" as opposed to "absolute" or "metaphysical" necessity (see, for example, T270). Our universe remains contingent in the sense that in itself it does not entail its own existence. There is no contradiction in asserting that some other universe exists or no universe at all. A contradiction only arises once we also assume the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God and the principle that God always does what it best. Leibniz thinks that this is sufficient to preserve a kind of intrinsic or *per se* contingency in the created universe. Likewise, we can say that God's decision to create our universe is contingent in the sense that the creation of other universes, or no universe at all, is consistent with his omnipotence, and that it is his perfect goodness or his perfect rationality that makes it the case that he cannot actually decide to do anything else. The result is that while, all things considered, our universe and everything in it could not have been other than it is, the created universe remains *per se* contingent. Considered in itself, it was within God's power to create some other universe or no universe at all. In what follows, I will set Leibniz's distinction between moral and metaphysical necessity to the side. For my purposes, it does not matter what kind of necessity binds us to our current state of affairs, only that in some very real sense things could not have been otherwise. Even if the existence of our universe and everything in it is only morally necessary, it still follows that there is no possible world in which any other state of affairs obtains. And that is all that my arguments require.

[38] See, for example, CP, 29. These are the two key features that Leibniz most often cites, but he sometimes speaks as if there are other relevant considerations as well. In his *Principles of Nature and Grace*, for example, he describes the best possible world as one that includes "the most power, knowledge, happiness, and goodness in created things that the universe could allow" (AG, 210).

There may be possible worlds that are lacking in all of these things, but Leibniz thinks that such worlds would also be severely limited in their diversity or their unity precisely on account of their lack of these things.[39]

Leibniz's method for assessing the overall value of worlds is nuanced and complex. In highly valued worlds, it is not just that any suffering, death, and hardship is outweighed by other goods present in those worlds, or that these other goods somehow compensate for any unfortunate evils. In some cases, it can happen that apparent evils, when seen from the perspective of eternity, actually provide positive value to the worlds that contain them. The metaphor that Leibniz most often uses to explain this idea, a metaphor that he borrows from Augustine, is the comparison to a beautiful work of art.[40] The dark patches that can be found in almost any beautiful painting might look ugly on their own, or at least less beautiful than other parts of the painting, but when the whole painting is in view, we see that the dark patches actually complement and augment the patches of color found elsewhere, and so improve the overall quality of the piece. The dark patches do not hinder or undermine the beauty of the painting. They are not unfortunate inclusions that need to be compensated for elsewhere. They make essential contributions to the beauty of the painting. When the whole painting is in view, we see that the dark patches both participate in and help to reflect the beauty of the whole.[41]

Leibniz thinks, then, that we have compelling a priori reasons to think that the world we occupy is the best of all possible worlds. He thinks that we should not be surprised to find

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[39] See, for example, CP, 49; Grua, 340-341; LGR, 293.
[40] See, for example, AG, 115; CP, 31; CP, 45; CP, 53; LGR, 279.
[41] As he puts it in the *Confessio*, "the unpleasantness that exists in these things considered in themselves is dispelled by the departure or, rather, actually by the increase from that source of the pleasantness of the whole. Hence, because of this compensation, the dissonant in this mixture is made indifferent from what was displeasing, the permitted from what was rejected" (CP, 63). However, Leibniz is quite clear that there are evils that are intrinsically bad, such as sin, which are ugly or unpleasant even considered from the perspective of the whole. Intrinsic evils like sin, then, do need to be compensated for by means of the beauty of the whole and should be regarded as unfortunate but unavoidable inclusions (see, for example, CP, 65).

various evils in this world because these evils are the cost of introducing a greater degree of diversity and unity. But he also thinks that, given our limited perspective, we should not expect to be able to know or properly appreciate the specific goods that are achieved by means of these evils.[42] Nevertheless, we can rest assured that there are such goods. Otherwise, God would not have chosen to create this world.

Now, given that this is the best of all possible worlds, any essentially damned individuals appearing in this world are also essential components of the best of all possible worlds. And so, their existence can in principle be justified with reference to the essential contributions that their lives make to the goodness of the whole, even if, given our limited perspective, we are unable to see or grasp the great goods that require their eternal damnation.[43] What might such goods be? Perhaps their knowledge of the suffering of the damned makes the blessed better appreciate their current state. Or perhaps God's justice is more fully revealed in a world in which rewards, temporary punishments, and everlasting punishments are all represented. Or perhaps it is the good of diversity that justifies the existence of the damned. For suppose that God wants to create an array of rational substances. Each rational substance is distinguished from every other by the particular events that occur in its life, by the particular things that it experiences and the particular choices that it makes. And so, the more we increase the diversity of rational substances within any given world, the more likely it is that that world will include rational substances who are essentially defined by the poor choices they make and by their negative experiences that result. Or perhaps the identity conditions of human persons are such that the only way that God can arrange that a great many persons are saved is to allow that some are damned. Perhaps the

[42] See, for example, AG, 115; CP, 101; LGR, 279.
[43] As Leibniz himself puts it, "Those who are punished are not the ones who impede the perfection of things, for, to put it briefly, that is impossible; but the ones who do not prevent the perfection of things from being impeded, these people by their own punishment contribute to the perfection of things" (LGR, 324).

number of persons saved in any world in which no person is eternally damned is significantly lower than in any world in which at least some are eternally damned. Perhaps through their interactions with others, interactions that are essential to the identities of both parties, those who end up eternally damned facilitate the salvation of hundreds or thousands of other persons who otherwise would not have been saved. In that case, the lives of the damned would play an essential role in producing the greatest possible outcome, namely, the greatest possible number of saved.[44]

Whether any of these considerations are the very considerations that God has in mind when he chooses to create a world in which some are eternally damned is, naturally, beyond our ken. In our current state, we are like mosquitos standing on the corner of a beautiful painting and wondering if the dark patch on which we stand improves or undermines the beauty of the whole. A mosquito would not see enough of the painting to be able to reliably evaluate the value of the whole or even the value of the dark patch on which it stands.

Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theodicy also further strengthens his superessentialist solution to the problem of regret. Earlier I argued that, if superessentialism is true, and Leibniz is right about the interconnectedness of all things, then the only way for the blessed in heaven to consistently regret the separation and suffering of their loved ones in hell is to desire or wish that none of us had ever existed, that some other set of creatures possessing different features in a different arrangement had existed instead. But, if Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theodicy is correct, and, in this world, there are those who are damned, then it must be the case that the damned are making essential contributions to making this world the best possible. In light of this

[44] For a soteriological theodicy (or, more precisely, a defense) of just this sort, see Craig, 1989. Craig builds his defense using Molinist counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, but the same sort of move is available to anyone who accepts, as the superessentialist does, that there are very rigid identity conditions for persons that are true prior to God's creation of any particular universe and so at his disposal when deciding precisely which universe to create.

fact, to desire or wish that the damned had not been damned or to desire or wish that they had never existed at all is to desire or wish that some worse world had been actualized instead of this one. And it is hard to see that desire or wish as rational or fitting for the blessed in heaven.[45]

VIII. Goods for the Damned?

Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theodicy, then, can be enlisted to help with the problem of the essentially damned. The existence of such persons can be justified at least in part with reference to the essential contributions that their lives make to this, the best of all possible worlds. But there is one last question that remains. Is there not some good or benefit which the eternal sufferer herself might enjoy and which we can bring in to somehow justify her existence? Several authors have argued that any successful theodicy, any successful justification of the suffering of any person in our world must involve at least some good or benefit to the one who suffers.[46] But is there room in Leibniz's system for any such good or benefit for the essentially damned?

Here it is important to keep in mind that, if superessentialism is true, then, for any essentially damned individuals, the only alternative to their unhappy existence is no existence at all. There simply is no possible state of affairs in which those individuals exist but suffer any less than they do. But if the only alternative for the damned is non-existence, then we cannot say that the suffering existence of the damned is in any way worse (or better) for them than some other state of affairs that they might have enjoyed instead. For, a state of affairs is good or bad for some subject if and only if it provides some benefit or harm for that subject. A state of affairs is better for some subject than some other state of affairs if and only if the benefits for that subject in the first are greater than those for the subject in the second or the harms for that subject in the

[45] Thanks to Dylan Flint for pointing me to this further upshot.
[46] See, for example, Stump, 1985 and Murray, 2011 for discussion.

first are lesser than those for the subject in the second. And a state of affairs is worse for some subject than some other state of affairs if and only if the harms for that subject in the first are greater than those for the subject in the second or the benefits for that subject in the first are lesser than those for the subject in the second. What follows from this is that a state of affairs can only be good or bad, better or worse than some other, for some particular subject only if the subject exists in that state of affairs. If the subject does not exist in that particular state of affairs, then that state of affairs cannot be good or bad, better or worse than some other, for that subject precisely because she can in no way be benefited or harmed in that state of affairs. For she does not exist there to be benefited or harmed. And that which does not exist cannot be benefitted or harmed.[47]

According to superessentialism, for the essentially damned, there is no possible state of affairs in which those individuals exist but suffer any less than they do. In fact, there is no possible state of affairs at all in which those individuals exist and their lives go any differently than they do in this world. As a result, Leibniz's superessentialism makes any cross-world comparative evaluation of the lives of the essentially damned impossible. For there is no other world that they could have occupied. Their lives could not have been different in any way. The most that can be done is to evaluate the actual goods or evils experienced by the essentially damned in this world, the only world they could have occupied.[48]

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[47] This is the central insight of Epicurean arguments for the harmlessness of death (for some helpful overviews, see Cyr, 2017 and Fischer, 2019). It is perhaps worth noting that the leading response to Epicurean arguments for the harmlessness of death, deprivationism, is itself a counterfactual account: when death harms a person, it harms her because it deprives her of the valuable goods or opportunities that she would have enjoyed had she lived longer. If superessentialism is true, however, then this neutralizes the deprivationist response. For, in that case, whenever the person dies, there is no possible state of affairs in which that very person exists and dies any earlier or later than she does. Notice also that the foregoing is meant only to block the claim that a world in which the damned do not exist might be better for them than a world in which they are in fact damned. One could argue that even if a world in which the damned do not exist is not better for those particular persons, it is a better world overall. But that is precisely what is being denied in Leibniz's best of all possible worlds theodicy.

[48] But what about Christ's claim concerning Judas that "It would have been better for that man if he had never been born" (Mark 14:21)? I think that there are two things that can be said here. The first is to point out that Christ does not say that it would have been better for Judas had he never existed, only that it would have been better for him had

For similar reasons, it is also not unjust for God to create such persons. Leibniz discusses the nature of justice, and, in particular, the nature of divine justice, in several places. One of his most important discussions on this topic can be found in his "Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice". Here he defines justice as "nothing other than the charity of the wise" (Riley 54) and as "a constant will to act in such a way that no one has a reason to complain of us" (Riley 53). According to the latter definition, God would be acting unjustly with respect to the essentially damned in creating them only if the damned have reason to complain about his having put them in such a state or condition. Are there reasonable grounds for such a complaint? Recall that, according to Leibniz, the damned have no reason to complain about the fact that they are suffering, for any suffering that they experience is a fair and fitting punishment for their defiant rejection of God and also the natural consequence of their free decision to separate themselves from him. They also have no reason to complain about the perpetuity of their suffering, since that perpetuity is ensured only by their repeated and continual rejection of God. Finally, the damned have no reason to complain about God having put them in such a state or condition because, once they come to learn the truth about their own identity conditions, they will also realize that there is no other state or condition that God could have put them in. In the same text, Leibniz describes the sort of complaint that he thinks is relevant to evaluations of justice. Here he imagines the sort of complaint which would indicate that some sort of injustice has been done: "You could make me happy and you do not do it: I complain; you would complain in the same situation; thus, I complain with justice" (Riley 55). Notice the counterfactual element of his remarks here. Leibniz seems to be suggesting in this passage that

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he never been born. A possible interpretation of this passage is that Christ is saying that it would have been better for Judas to die in utero rather than be born, survive to adulthood, and later betray him (see Pruss, 2011 for an example of this sort of interpretation). The second option is to say that Christ is speaking hyperbolically in this passage, for rhetorical effect, as he appears to be doing in other passages in Scripture, such as Matthew 5: 29-30, where he tells his followers to cut off and throw away their right hands if they cause them to sin.

one is right to complain about one's state or condition only in the case that one's state or condition could have been better than what it is. As a result, God has not acted unjustly with respect to the essentially damned in creating them, then, because he did not do any less for those particular persons than he could have. For, assuming the truth of superessentialism, there is no better state or condition that they could have enjoyed instead. Consider once again the passage above from Leibniz's *Confessio* (CP 105-107). Here he argues that anyone who might want to complain about God's decision to allow Adam and Eve to commit the first sin (in light of the history of atrocities that followed) should see that their complaint has no reason or merit. For, had God not allowed Adam and Eve to commit the first sin, no one who is in a position to complain about it would have existed. Thus, there is no reasonable complaint to be made here. And thus, according to Leibniz, there is no credible claim to be made that God has acted unjustly toward the essentially damned.[49]

The suffering existence of the essentially damned is not, then, any worse (or better) than any other state or condition that they could have enjoyed instead, and, for that same reason, God has not acted unjustly toward them. But, for all that, is there any positive good that the damned experience or enjoy which might justify their existence? Earlier we saw that, according to Leibniz, this world is the best of all possible worlds and every person in this world makes an essential contribution to making it so. For every individual within our world, the world would not be the best possible world without that person. Now, recall Leibniz's art analogy. Each patch of color within a beautiful work of art contributes to, participates in, and reflects the beauty of the whole, even those patches which might, when considered on their own, appear ugly or less beautiful than the other patches. If we take this analogy seriously, then there is a sense in which

[49] Thanks to Juan Garcia Torres for pointing me to the passages discussed in this paragraph.

the damned do experience or enjoy some positive good: every one of them gets to contribute to, participate in, and reflect, in some small but essential way, the beauty of the whole.

One final thesis that Leibniz accepts that will be relevant for any attempt to justify the existence of the essentially damned is the convertibility of goodness and being. According to the thesis of the convertibility of goodness and being, goodness and being ultimately coincide. What this means is that to the extent that something exists, to that extent it is also good. Here Leibniz is borrowing from the scholastics, especially Aquinas.[50] According to Aquinas, for a thing to be good is for that thing to realize or actualize its kind-specific capacities. And to extent that it realizes or actualizes those capacities, to that extent it is good. A good knife is one that cuts, and a better knife is one that cuts smoothly. A good cheetah is one that runs, and a better cheetah is one that runs fast. A good human being is one that reasons, and a better human being is one that reasons well. But at an even more fundamental level, any created thing is good to the extent that it reflects some perfection of God. Every existing thing, insofar as it is essentially different from every other, reflects the diversity of the created world, and this diversity reflects the infinite perfection of its creator. Now, every existing thing other than God is lacking in the fullness of God's perfection, and so no created thing will be good to the degree that God is. But insofar as a thing exists at all, to that extent it necessarily reflects some aspect of some perfection of God.

What follows from the convertibility of goodness and being is that, for every existing thing, its existence is at least metaphysically good, even if it is not metaphysically perfect. And so, if we accept the convertibility of goodness and being, as Leibniz does, then nothing can exist and also be completely lacking in goodness. The result is that, for existing things, there is always some good to their existence, a good that, by virtue of existing, those things themselves experience or enjoy. Whether there are any other goods that the essentially damned might

[50] See, for example, Stump and Kretzmann, 1991.

nevertheless be said to enjoy which we might enlist to try to justify their existence will probably depend on how exactly we understand the nature of their separation and their suffering, and the sorts of activities and operations they are still capable of performing in such a state.[51]

IX. Conclusion

In conclusion, Leibniz has within his metaphysical system various resources that allow him to offer some unique solutions to two persisting problems for the traditional Christian conception of the afterlife, problems that I called the problem of regret and the problem of the essentially damned. With respect to the problem of regret, Leibniz's superessentialism makes it impossible for any of the blessed to rationally regret the particular choices and actions that led their loved ones to everlasting damnation. With respect to the problem of the essentially damned, Leibniz has at least four resources in his system that can help to explain why God might create certain individuals knowing that they will perpetually reject him and so suffer in hell for all eternity. His best of all possible worlds theodicy entails that each of the essentially damned makes an essential contribution to the particular features that make this world the best of all possible worlds. His superessentialism entails that no matter how bad their suffering is, the existence of the essentially damned is not any worse for them than any other possible state of affairs that God could have actualized instead (and this is so because there is no possible state of affairs in which those persons exist and suffer any less than they do), and for the same reason it is not unjust for God to have created them. Leibniz's art analogy entails that each of the essentially damned not only contributes to, but also reflects, participates, and shares in, the great goodness of the beauty of this world. And his commitment to the convertibility of the goodness

[51] But notice that, however we understand the nature of the separation and the suffering of the damned, we should not expect their lives to be delightful or ultimately rewarding. We should not even expect that their lives are, on balance, good, or anywhere near as good as the lives of the blessed. If damnation turned out to be not that bad, then this would hardly serve as a deterrent for sinful behavior. The goal here, rather, is to show that there are at least some goods enjoyed by the essentially damned, thus showing that their lives are not *merely* instrumentally good.

and being entails that the existence of the essentially damned is a minimal but positive good for them, at least to the extent that it involves the realization or actualization of certain basic human capacities and reflects some aspect of some perfection of God. I have not argued here that Leibniz's metaphysical system provides the best of all possible solutions to these problems. But what I hope to have shown is that it does provide some interesting and intriguing solutions not available elsewhere.[52]

Declarations:

Funding: No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Competing Interests: The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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[52] Thanks to Mike Dougherty, Larry Masek, Dylan Flint, Sam Newlands, and other audience members at The Ohio State University, the American Catholic Philosophical Association, and the Society for Philosophy of Religion for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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