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The *Apokatastasis* Essays in Context: Leibniz and Thomas Burnet on the Kingdom of Grace and the Stoic/Platonic Revolutions

One of Leibniz's more unusual philosophical projects is his presentation (in a series of unpublished drafts) of an argument for a cyclical cosmology. As expressed in a draft essay from 1701, the argument concludes that there will necessarily come a time when "nothing would happen that had not happened before" (*nihil fiat quod non factum sit prius*).¹ Leibniz's presentation of the argument is all too brief, and his discussion of its implications is obscure. Moreover, the conclusion itself seems to be at odds with the main thrust of Leibniz's own metaphysics: the doctrine of the return of the same could be considered, as it is later by David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche, to be a radical affirmation of a materialism or *naturalism* that views the world as the result of a blind necessity or chance rather than as shaped by purposes or provident design. So it is not surprising that Michel Fichant concludes in his thorough study of these texts that the cyclical cosmology presented therein is, for Leibniz, ultimately a mere "fiction."² Indeed, it is difficult to draw out of Leibniz's drafts a clearly defined doctrine of the return of the same, let alone signs of a firm *commitment* by Leibniz to such a doctrine. But I want to argue that we can nevertheless discern a serious and important point to Leibniz's consideration of the doctrine, namely in what it suggests about the proper boundary between metaphysics and theology, on the one hand, and ordinary history (whether human or natural), on the other.

To get a sense of what Leibniz means by this conclusion and whether it is a conclusion he could seriously entertain, we first need some sense of his underlying argument. The most notable feature of the argument from this point of view is that it rests not on any metaphysical or physical principles, but rather on a reflection on the implications of the finite nature of human knowledge. Leibniz argues, very roughly, as follows: since (1) all possible human knowledge can be expressed in a language employing a finite number of symbol-elements (e.g. letters) and arranged in strings of finite length, (2) there are also a finite number of *truths* that humans could ever articulate; and therefore (3) unique true accounts of future events—even of whole centuries or millennia—will eventually be exhausted³ such that (4) it is necessary that a time will come when everything one could truly say about a century (or millennium, etc.) will already have been truly said about a past century; and this is as much as saying that (5) the *events* of a whole century will reoccur since, as Leibniz says, "events provide the matter for words."⁴

There is much that could be said about each of these steps. But even this very rough sketch of the argument reveals an essential point for a proper interpretation of its conclusion: to say that if unique truths are inevitably exhausted then "the same events would return" (*redeant eadem gesta*)⁵ must mean, more precisely, that events will occur that warrant *the same description* in a given human language as events that occurred

¹ "Demonstrationes de Universo immenso aeternoque," in: G. W. Leibniz: *De l' Horizon de la Doctrine Humaine (1693)*; *Ἀποκατάστασις πάντων (La Restitution universelle) (1715)*, edited and translated by M. Fichant, Paris 1991, pp. 56–60 at p. 56. I have consulted the English translation in Allison Coudert: *Leibniz and the Kaballah*, Dordrecht 1995, p. 113f.

² Michel Fichant: "Ewige Wiederkehr oder unendlicher Fortschritt: Die Apokatastasisfrage bei Leibniz," in: *Studia Leibnitiana* 23/2 (1991), pp. 133–150, at 150.

³ There are only so many ways that one can describe future sea battles and, for the same reason, only so many ways one can describe a whole future century's events.

⁴ Leibniz: "Demonstrationes de Universo immenso aeternoque," p. 56. For a discussion of this argument, see Nicholas Rescher: *On Leibniz. Expanded Edition*, Pittsburgh 2013, ch. 6.

⁵ Leibniz: "Demonstrationes de Universo immenso aeternoque," p. 56.

previously; and this is consistent with saying that the two sets of events are not *exactly* similar, namely, that the two sets of events also have dissimilarities of the sort that cannot be captured in language. Indeed, in describing his own conclusion, Leibniz remarks: “certainly there will always be differences of some sort between the old and the new, but they will be imperceptible, and precisely of the sort that could not be expressed in books.”⁶ In short, the conclusion about the return of the “same events” must be understood in a qualified sense that is consistent with the principle of the identity of indiscernibles. If nothing else, this tells us that we cannot simply dismiss the whole argument as one that Leibniz would consider to have a manifestly absurd conclusion.

Indeed, this qualification is central to Leibniz’s overall purpose in the essays. He stresses there that the impossibility of an *exact* return leaves room for the possibility of *progress* between the old and the new. The doctrine of the return of the same reflects the Stoic view that this world and in general the present already contain maximal perfection. But Leibniz remarks that even if a previous century returns “as far as sensible events go, it could happen that things gradually make progress towards the best, albeit imperceptibly, after the revolutions [or “behind the revolutions”: *post revolutionem*].”⁷ Leibniz thus affirms that the revolutions will occur “a greater number of times than can be assigned,”⁸ while also insisting that they need not be depicted in terms of a perfectly circular movement, but could also be conceived as “a spiraling progression or Platonic year with advancement.”⁹

Although Leibniz’s proposed cyclical cosmology is thus *qualified* in this important way, the qualified version has consequences that are startling enough. Leibniz thus tells us that according to his proposal, in the far distant future, “I myself, for example, would be living in a city called Hannover situated on the river Leine, occupied with the history of Brunswick, and writing letters to the same friends with the same meaning.”¹⁰ This image of the future Leibniz-counterpart recalls ancient accounts of Stoic cosmology: according to the 4th century account of Nemesius, the Stoics hold that in future world ages “again there will be Socrates and Plato and each one of mankind with the same friends and fellow citizens.”¹¹

This Stoic precedent is also suggested by the Greek titles Leibniz gives to the two draft essays from 1715 that contain his most detailed argument for a cyclical cosmology, namely “*Ἀποκατάστασις πάντων*” and “*Ἀποκατάστασις*”: the term ‘*apokatastasis*’ is used by ancient authors to refer to the restitution or reconstitution of all things in Stoic cyclical cosmology. Thus Nemesius writes:

“The Stoics say that when the planets return to the same celestial sign ... at set periods of time they cause conflagration and destruction of existing things. Once again the world returns anew to the same condition as before [*palin ex huparchês eis to auto ton kosmon apokathistasthai*]. [...] The periodic return of everything [*apokatastasis tou pantos*] occurs not once but many times; or rather, the same things return infinitely and without end [...]. [And] there will be nothing strange in comparison with what occurred previously, but everything will be just the same and indiscernible down to the smallest details.”¹²

⁶ Letter to Overbeck 17 June 1715; in Leibniz: *De l' Horizon*, p. 86.

⁷ “Ἀποκατάστασις,” in Leibniz: *De l' Horizon*, pp. 66–76 at p. 72. Translated by Lloyd Stickland as “Revolution” at leibniz-translations.com/revolution.htm.

⁸ “Ἀποκατάστασις”/“Revolution,” p. 72f.

⁹ “Demonstrationes de Universo immenso aeternoque,” p. 60.

¹⁰ “Ἀποκατάστασις πάντων,” in Leibniz *De l' Horizon*, pp. 60–66 at p. 64.

¹¹ Nemesius 309,5–311,2; in A. A. Long/D. N. Sedley (eds.): *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., Cambridge 1987, entry 52 C. See Fichant: “Ewige Wiederkehr,” p. 140f.

¹² Nemesius 309,5–311,2; in Long/Sedley: *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, entry 52 C. Eusebius reports the Stoic’s view of the “resurrection [*anastasis*] which creates the greatest year, in which the reconstitution from itself alone into itself recurs [*eis auten palin ginetai hê apokatastasis*]” (*Praeparatio evangelica* 15.19.1–2; in Long/Sedley: *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, entry 52 D). Also see Ps.-Dionysius: *de divin. nom.* ch. 4.4.

Although Leibniz does not use the term ‘apokatastasis’ within the essays themselves, he does confirm there that his topic is the “revolutions” of identical world ages that “the ancients” understood in connection with the Platonic “great year” (*annus magnus*).¹³ And he comments elsewhere that the essays concern “the revolution or palingenesis [*revolutio seu palingenesia*] of all things.”¹⁴ This comment recalls the Stoic claim from Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations* (which Leibniz knew) that the rational soul “comprehends the periodical renovation [*palingenesia*] of all things, and it comprehends that those who come after us will see nothing new” (XI.i).¹⁵

This ancient pagan lineage of the doctrine of the return of the same serves to highlight its apparent incompatibility with Christian faith and, more generally, with the theological principle that rational beings receive rewards and punishment in the next world. But we do have some (admittedly circumstantial) evidence that Leibniz intended the doctrine to be compatible with Christianity in the fact that the family of ancient terms that Leibniz chooses to invoke in connection with his presentation of a cyclical cosmology has a home in Christian as well as Stoic eschatology. Thus the book of Matthew relates that Jesus told his followers that after the destruction of this world they will receive everlasting life in the *palingenesia*, that is, in the regeneration (Vulgate: ‘regeneratio’; Luther’s Bible: ‘Wiedergeburt’) (19:28–29). And in the apostolic history, we are told that Jesus is the vehicle for fulfilling the Hebrew prophecy of an *apokatastasis panton*, i.e., a refreshing or restitution of all things (Vulgate: ‘restitutio omnium’; Luther’s Bible speaks of everything being ‘herwiedergebracht’) (Acts 3:21).¹⁶ One additional point of convergence between Stoic and Christian eschatology is worth noting: in each case the creation of a new world follows upon the fiery destruction or conflagration (*ekpurôsis*) of the old. Thus Christian prophecy tells us that there will be a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein the righteous dwelleth” after “the earth and its works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10–13).

It is characteristic of early Christian apologists to emphasize precisely these parallels, aiming to situate novel and strange-sounding Christian eschatological doctrines regarding the destruction of the world and the bodily resurrection of the dead within a (then) more familiar gentile philosophical context that included the Stoic conflagration and world cycles. Clement of Alexandria (fl. 190–215 CE), for example, claims in this vein that Hebrew wisdom was passed to Heraclitus regarding the “purification by fire of those who have led bad lives, which the Stoics afterwards called the conflagration (*ekpurôsis*), in which also they teach that each will arise exactly as he was, so treating of the resurrection” (*Stromata* V 1.9).¹⁷ And the term ‘apokatastasis’ is associated particularly with the interpretation presented by Origen of Alexandria (185–254 CE) of the Biblical prophecy, noted above, of a restitution of all (Acts 3:21). Origen’s account of *apokatastasis*—subsequently denounced at the Second Council of Constantinople—incorporates Stoic and Platonic elements: all intelligent creatures will return to God at the end of all world ages after a period of purification by fire, i.e., when evil will be destroyed and all souls will be saved. Significantly, Origen’s cosmos has a circular structure not only

¹³ “‘Αποκατάστασις’/‘Revolution,’” pp. 72–74; cf. “Demonstrationes de Universo immenso aeternoque,” pp. 56–58, and “‘Αποκατάστασις πάντων,” p. 64. Plato mentions the “great year” at *Timaeus* 39c–d.

¹⁴ Letter to Overbeck 17 June 1715; in Leibniz: *De l’ Horizon*, p. 86.

¹⁵ See Ilaria Ramelli: *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis. A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena*, Leiden 2013, p. 7. Eusebius also uses a cognate of the term ‘*palingenesia*’ in the report cited above. As with ‘*apokatastasis*,’ the term ‘*palingenesia*’ is appropriated into Christian eschatology (e.g. Matthew 19:28) to refer the world to come as a kind of new creation.

¹⁶ Ramelli points out that all of the ancient sources that use the term *apokatastasis* in explaining Stoic cosmology are, in fact, Christian (*The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, pp. 3–8).

¹⁷ See Jaap Mansfeld: “Resurrection Added: The *Interpretatio Christiana* of a Stoic Doctrine,” in: *Vigiliae Christianae*, 37/3 (1983), pp. 218–233 at 225.

in the sense that the end of all things will be like the beginning, but also in the sense that the purification of souls will be achieved over innumerable world ages.¹⁸ Moreover:

“[T]his result must be understood as being brought about, not suddenly, but slowly and gradually, seeing that the process of amendment and correction will take place imperceptibly in the individual instances during the lapse of countless and unmeasured ages.”¹⁹

This account bears more than a passing resemblance to Leibniz’s vision of progress occurring “behind the revolutions.”

Leibniz’s own discussion of “Platonic periods” does not address any of these finer points of Stoic and Christian eschatology. But they are relevant, at least indirectly, to the larger question raised by his discussion, namely the question of the compatibility of the optimism and hope for the future represented by the Christian view of divine justice or grace and the materialism or naturalism represented by the Stoic return of the same. Here the idea of world conflagration represents a pivotally ambiguous concept. And we know that Leibniz was thinking about this issue around the time of the composition of the *apokatastasis* essays. In a lecture manuscript from 1714 on the theology of ancient Greek and “so-called barbarian” wise men, Leibniz asserts (in the manner of the *prisca theologia* tradition) that the essential truths of both natural and revealed religion were passed from Noah to the various barbarian nations and then to the Greeks even before the spread of Christianity. And here Leibniz calls attention to the widespread belief among ancient pagans in a world conflagration. To this end, he quotes three lines from Ovid that refer to the time “when the sea, the land, and the palace of the invaded sky would burn” and cites the chapter from Clement we encountered above to establish that Heraclitus asserted the conflagration even before the Stoics.²⁰

In noting this and other parallels between Christian and pagan eschatology, Leibniz continues in the tradition not only of the early Church apologists, but also of later thinkers like the neo-Stoic Justus Lipsius and Augustino Steuco.²¹ Leibniz does not mention any such modern thinkers in the lecture by name, but does recommend “an exceptional dissertation on the Stoic world conflagration [*de Stoica mundi exustione*] by a learned man.”²² This is surely a reference to the *Exercitatio de stoica mundi exustione* (1676) by Jakob Thomasius, Leibniz’s former teacher at Leipzig. Thomasius clearly was an important influence on Leibniz, particularly with respect to his exposure to ancient thought and, more generally, to his conceiving of his own philosophy in the context of the history of philosophy.²³ But while the patristic apologists, Renaissance Platonists, and

¹⁸ Origen rejects the *exact* recurrence of the same on the grounds that it is incompatible with free will (II.iii.4; cf. *Contra Celsus* IV.67–8), but he nevertheless affirms that “after this age, which is said to be formed for the consummation of other ages, there will be other ages again to follow, as we have clearly learned from Paul himself” (quoting Ephesians 2:7). Origen does not use the term ‘apokatastasis’ to describe the transition from one such world age to the next, but rather to describe the movement of all back to God over many ages (*De Principiis* II.iii.5; cf. Fichant: “Ewige Wiederkehr,” p. 138). But his *apokatastasis* is nevertheless like a rebirth of the world insofar as all things are thereby “recalled to one end, which is like the beginning” (I.vi.2; cf. the 15th Anathema against Origen of the Second Council of Constantinople). (All translations of Origen from Alexander Roberts *et al.* (eds.): *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, Buffalo 1885; accessed at www.newadvent.org/fathers/0412.htm.)

¹⁹ Origen: *De Principiis*, III.vi.6.

²⁰ “On the Greeks as the Founders of Rational Theology,” in: *Political Writings*, 2nd edition, Cambridge 1988, 235–240 at 238f. (Leibniz cites Clement, *Stromata* V, and quotes from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I, 256.) I have consulted the Latin text in Patrick Riley: “An Unpublished Lecture by Leibniz on the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology: Its Relation to His ‘Universal Jurisprudence,’” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 14/2 (1976), 205–216.

²¹ Lipsius, in his *Physiologia Stoicorum* (1604), read Seneca on deluge and conflagration in terms of Noah and the final judgment (II.21–23; see Kuni Sakamoto: “Eclecticism as Seneca’s Heritage: Evil and the Cosmic Cycle in Justus Lipsius,” in: Hiro Hirai & Jan Papy (eds.), *Justus Lipsius and Natural Philosophy*, Brussels 2011, pp. 97–106 at 103–105). And Steuco concluded his books *De perennis philosophiae* (1540) with a chapter “De mundi exito,” which begins with the three lines from Ovid that appear later in Lipsius and then again in Leibniz’s lecture.

²² “On the Greeks as the Founders of Rational Theology,” p. 238.

²³ See Christia Mercer: *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: It’s Origins and Development*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 32–36, 202–207.

“neo-ancients” like Lipsius, all sought to find at least partial truth in Stoic eschatology, Thomasius emphasizes instead precisely its heretical implications.

Like Lipsius, Thomasius notes both that the doctrine of conflagration is scriptural (referring to 2 Peter 3:10) and that it is especially associated with Stoicism, despite its having diverse ancient precedents (citing *inter alia* the familiar three lines of Ovid) (Theses, 1, 6, 9).²⁴ He notes, further, that the world conflagration is wrongly denied by both Plato and Aristotle (as well as by later Stoics such as Posidonius and Panaetius) and is affirmed by the Stoics Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus (as well as by Epicureans) (Thesis 8). But Thomasius remarks, with explicit reference to Lipsius, that it is “not possible to acquit of impiety the Stoics’ doctrine on the conflagration of the world” (Thesis 11, note k). Specifically, the “mad sect of Zeno” retains none of the four essential features of the true, scriptural doctrine, since it imagines the destruction of the world (1) to take place from “the fatal necessity of nature” rather than God’s “freest will”; (2) to destroy even souls; (3) to be a withdrawal of the spiritual/divine principle into itself (leaving the world a “formless chaos”) rather than a true annihilation; and (4) to issue forth in an eternal recurrence of everything, which is at odds with the true doctrine that the world will be destroyed “so that groaning creation is delivered from the bondage of corruption,” *i.e.*, it is at odds with the doctrine that the destruction of the present world marks the resurrection of the dead in the next (Theses 10-11). In keeping with his concern to combat philosophical accounts of the world’s eternity, Thomasius claims that the doctrine of eternal recurrence is, among the Stoic errors, “the least of all to be tolerated” (Thesis 16). To help us visualize this intolerable doctrine, Thomasius offers us a pictorial representation of the Stoic cosmogony in which the endless cycle of world ages is likened to the lifecycle of bird and egg (*Fig. 1*).

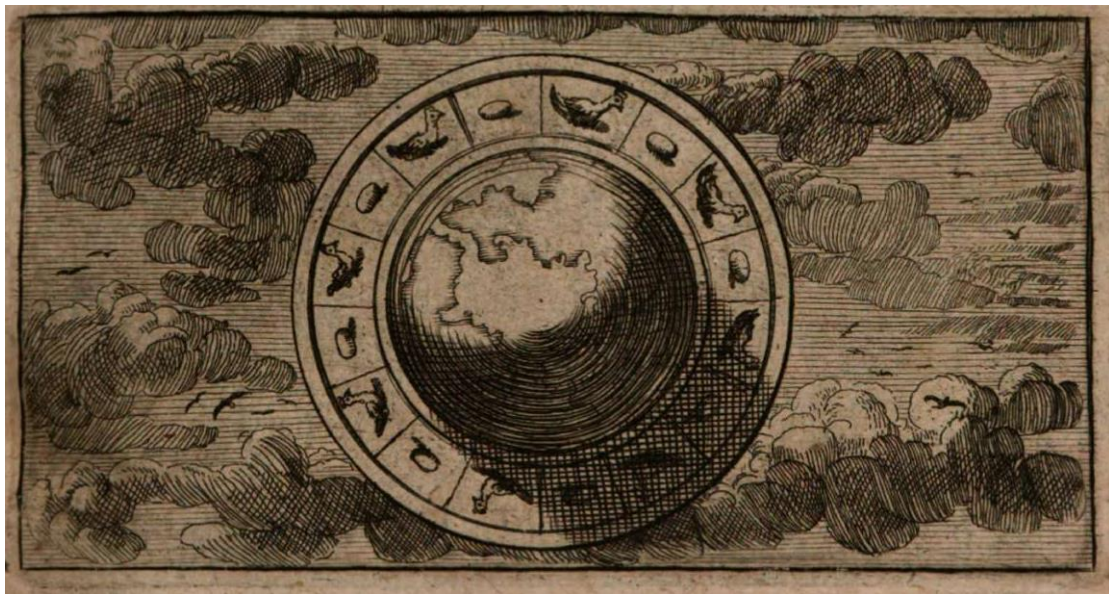


Figure 1. Depiction of the Stoic cosmogony in Jakob Thomasius’s *Exercitatio de Stoica Mundi Exustione* of 1676. Image courtesy of the Münchner Digitalisierungszentrum.

Significantly, Thomasius does not relegate this family of errors to ancient history, but rather sees it as infecting Christianity. Especially dangerous here is the rehabilitation of Origen among some humanists and Calvinists: Origen is a heretic who retains the errors

²⁴ Mansfeld notes that early Christian authors understood the term *ekpurōsis* (conflagration) as particularly Stoic and that they “incorporated it into their own eschatology—rejecting, naturally, the cyclical aspect” (“Resurrection Added,” p. 220f.). This is true of Clement and Minucius Felix, both of whom Thomasius cites in this connection.

from the Stoic half of his thought, and, in particular, retains the error that there is an infinite succession of worlds (Thesis 17 and Diss. 17).

Leibniz is surely aware of this critique, but in the 1714 lecture chooses to remain silent on Origen and the Stoic eternal recurrence, mentioning only the meager point of positive agreement with orthodoxy regarding the conflagration that Thomasius had also noted in passing. Leibniz shares none of Thomasius's zeal for smoking out heretics. Indeed, although Leibniz often expresses a mere toleration for the Origenist doctrine of universal salvation,²⁵ in the *Theodicy* he is willing to call those aiming to revive the opinion of Origen "pious," and he mentions in this connection of "a great and learned work entitled 'Αποκατάστασις πάντων'" (§17).²⁶ And he continues by remarking that he finds "pleasing" the astronomical speculations of "an Origenist" regarding a future world conflagration that will turn the earth back into a sun while leading all rational creatures to return to God (§18). Leibniz is referring here to Thomas Burnet (ca. 1635–1715), an associate of the Cambridge Platonists, and his *Telluris Theoria Sacra*.²⁷ Of particular interest here is the second volume *de Conflagratione Mundi et de Futuro Rerum Statu*,²⁸ which was published in 1689—and thus not long before Leibniz's own argument from 1701 regarding the necessity of the "great year" of Plato and his elaboration of this argument in the *apokatastasis* essays of 1715.

Burnet's aim in the *Telluris Theoria* is to provide a history of the creation and future destruction of the earth that fits not only the evidence of traditional wisdom, but also the principles of *natural* philosophy. He is eager to enlist the support of pagan authority, noting that it was especially to Stoics who have conserved the doctrine of the conflagration. Referring to Clement, he also points to earlier Greek expressions of the doctrine in Heraclitus and Empedocles and claims that the doctrine reached the Greeks from a still more ancient "barbarian" source in the East. Indeed, he considers the doctrine to be universal among the nations and to stem ultimately from Noah (III.iii). And he characterizes the emergence and repopulation of a paradisiacal new earth after the conflagration with the Greek terms we have seen that Leibniz employs: the 'palingenesia kai apokatastasis' or the 'apokatastasis panton' (e.g., II.xi, p. 305; III.ii, p. 11; and III.iv), again explicitly referencing not only Scriptural, but also pagan, and particularly Stoic, precedents. Finally, he ties these concepts to that of the Platonic great year (*annus magnus*) corresponding to the lifespan of the present world (noting, however, that we are not able to calculate its length) (III.iv).

Despite this, Burnet explicitly rejects the strictly cyclical cosmology associated with the pagan and Stoic uses of these terms (III.iii, p. 16f.).²⁹ Nevertheless, Burnet affirms that with the conflagration will come a new chaos and then a new earth to be reinhabited by those who are raised from the dead after the first resurrection from sin. And he makes a

²⁵ See Lloyd Strickland: "Leibniz on Eternal Punishment," in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 17/2 (2009), pp. 307–331.

²⁶ G. W. Leibniz: "Essais de Theodicee," GP VI, 21–471; translated as *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, Peru 1985. Leibniz is referring to Johann Wilhelm Peterson's *Μυστήριον ἀποκατάστασεως πάντων, das ist, das Geheimniß der Wiederbringung aller Dinge*, 3 vols., Pamphilia 1700–1710. For Leibniz's interest in Peterson's work, see A I 10, 816 (translated at leibniz-translations.com/burnett.htm), Fichant: "Ewige Wiederkehr," p. 137, and Strickland: "Leibniz on Eternal Punishment."

²⁷ *Telluris Theoria Sacra: Orbis Nostri Originem & Mutationes Generales, quas aut jam subiit, aut olim subiturus est, Complectens*, 4 books printed in 2 vols., London 1681–89. An English reworking of the same material was published as *The Theory of the Earth*, 2 vols., London 1684–1690. (Later English editions use the longer title *The Sacred Theory of Earth*.) A German translation published in Hamburg soon followed.

²⁸ The subtitle of the second volume in the English version is *The Last Two Books Concerning the Burning of the World and Concerning the New Heavens and New Earth*.

²⁹ In the English version, Burnet writes that according to the Stoics "there would be the same face of human affairs; The same Persons and the same actions over again; So as the second World would be but a bare repetition of the former, without any variety or diversity. Such a revolution is commonly call'd the *Platonick Year*: A period, when all things return to the same posture they had some thousands of years before; As a Play acted over again, upon the same Stage, and to the same Auditory. This is a groundless and injudicious supposition" (*Theory of the Earth*, III.iii, p. 18).

point of connecting this view not only to Scripture, but also to the Stoic *apokatastasis* and *palingenesia* (IV.v, p. 184).³⁰ We can see on the frontispiece of the work (*Fig. 2*) (and we can imagine Leibniz observing) that the ante-deluvian earth and the new, millennial earth have an identical appearance as corresponding paradisiacal worlds. Moreover, the overall circular shape of the depiction there of geological history points to a further important feature of Burnet's view, namely that the inhabitants of the new earth will engage in devotion to and contemplation of the divine nature until they themselves achieve a union with God—thereby completing the circle or revolution, i.e., Origen's *apokatastasis*.

What Leibniz can appreciate in Burnet's theory is its attempt to find common ground between Christian and pagan doctrines and especially between metaphysics and theology, on the one hand, and natural explanation, on the other. Leibniz thus praises Burnet for showing how the events of sacred history occur "by natural causes occurring at the appointed time" and thus "by virtue of the *harmonic parallelism* of the realms of nature and grace" (*Theodicy* §18).³¹ From this perspective, Burnet's theory is an advance beyond those that resort to miracles at every turn. And it is *also* an advance beyond Descartes's pretense that his natural history of the earth is nothing but a useful fiction, the "true" world having been created some six thousand years ago when Adam and Eve were created not as infants, but as adults.³² Descartes's fiction represents a supreme *disharmony* or schism between the principle of nature and the metaphysical and theological principle of grace. But Burnet goes wrong in his own way by "pushing my principle of harmony even to arbitrary suppositions," namely in creating an "astronomical" theology (*Theodicy* §18). Burnet's error is that he infers the basic framework for the *natural* history of earth and the heavens directly from a theological principle of *divine wisdom* or providence (and more particularly from Scripture and pagan antiquity).

In a striking passage from the *Theodicy*, Leibniz compares the world to a "series of numbers perfectly irregular to all appearance" and without any discernable order whatsoever. Even such a series, he tells us, could be generated by a rule that shows the series to be "perfectly regular." This is how we should understand the "so-called defects" in the universe (§242). For Leibniz, then, although divine wisdom does ensure that the world possesses a perfect order, this wisdom is wholly compatible with any degree of disorder or seeming chance that we may encounter in our small region of the universe. And that is as much as to say that we cannot infer any kind of order in a particular region of the universe from the metaphysical principle that the universe as a whole is well ordered and that minds are well governed. Accordingly, Leibniz objects to Burnet's assumption that our own globe has a unique place in the consummation of things (§18). Indeed, Leibniz asserts against Burnet that there must be an *innumerable* number of such globes, that they too could very well have rational inhabitants, and thus that whatever we do know about our globe "is almost lost in nothingness compared with that which is unknown" (§19).

All of this leads to the conclusion that, contrary to Burnet's method, a natural history of the earth should be *autonomous* with respect to theological principles. For the pre-established harmony of the principle of nature with the principle of grace allows only

³⁰ The corresponding passage in the English *Theory of Earth* appears at IV.iii, p. 148f.

³¹ Burnet describes his account as a "system of natural providence" (*Providentiae naturalis systema*), claiming that "the Course of Nature is truly the will of God." Without denying miracles outright, he remarks that "we often make use of [God's extraordinary power] only to conceal our own Ignorance, or to save us the Trouble of inquiring into natural Causes" (*Theory of Earth* I.i, p. 2; II.ix, p. 440). In his influential critique of Burnet, John Keill writes: "But of all Philosophers, those have done Religion the least service, who have not only asserted, that the world was made by the laws of Mechanism, without the extraordinary concurrence of the Divine power, but also that all the great changes which have happened to it, such as the Deluge, and other great effects delivered to us as miracles by the sacred writers, were the necessary consequences of natural causes, which they pretend to account for" (*An Examination of Dr. Burnet's Theory of the Earth*, Oxford 1698, p. 19)

³² *Œuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam & Paul Tannery, vol. 8, Part 1: *Principia Philosophiæ*, Paris 1905, p. 100.

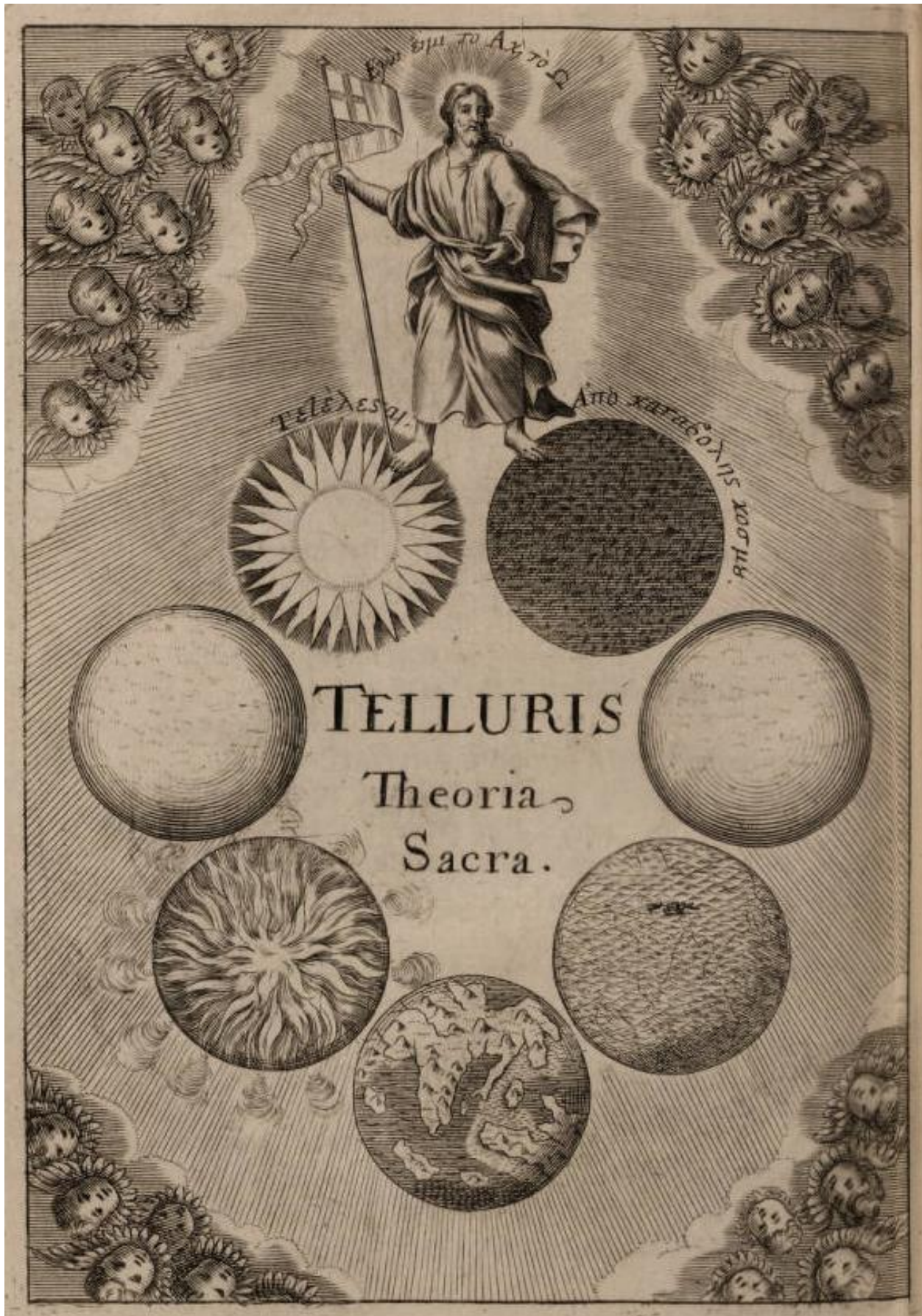


Figure 2. Frontispiece to Thomas Burnet's *Telluris Theoria Sacra*, vol. 2 (1689), depicting the stages of earth's history, namely from the creation of the world ("apo katabolês kosmou") to the consummation ("tetelestai"; "it is completed"). The inscription on top reads "Ego eimi to alpha kai to omega"; "I am the alpha and the omega." Image courtesy of the Linda Hall Digital Library.

the wholly *general* conclusion that whatever events (and seeming disorders) we discover by natural evidence are *somehow* part of a providential plan for rational beings. Referring in the *Monadology* back to the discussion of Burnet in the *Theodicy*, Leibniz thus remarks:

“This harmony leads things to grace through the very paths of nature. For example, this globe must be destroyed and restored by natural means at such times as the governing of minds requires it, for the punishment of some and the reward of others.”³³

The essential point here is that this cycle of creation and destruction need not have any order or wisdom apparent to us. And thus we find that the history of the earth that Leibniz himself had provided in the *Protogaea* (composed between 1691 and 1693) appeals solely to natural evidence, invoking sacred history only in the vaguest possible terms.³⁴ The ultimate reasons for the things of the world remain *hidden*.³⁵

Leibniz does not directly address the autonomy of natural explanation in his essays on the Platonic periods. But this theme remains close to the surface. The explicit theme of the essays is the finite nature of human knowledge and, in particular, how the exhaustion of unique finite accounts of future events still leaves room for an unseen progress “behind the revolutions.” But this implies that natural explanation or ordinary history is radically autonomous with respect to the principle of grace: the operation of grace in nature might be hidden from us on account of the very constitution of our cognitive faculty. And in this way the essays live up to the title “*Apokatastasis panton*”—not because Leibniz stakes out a view there on universal salvation, but rather because the essays suggest a radical solution to the problem of the harmony of nature and grace that Burnet had addressed only inadequately.

³³ “Monadologie” §88, GP VI, 607–623 at 622; quoted from “The Principles of Philosophy, or the Monadology,” in: G. W. Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, Indianapolis 1989, pp. 213–225 at 224.

³⁴ Rejecting Burnet’s assumption that the earth has been shaped by the *single* great flood known from sacred history and traditional wisdom, Leibniz suggests that there have been many such floods and that the current habitable state of the earth emerged only when “these upheavals ceased at last” (*Theodicy* §245). Anyone expecting some new source of geological formations will have to wait for “another world after the Platonic revolution of things” (*dum orbe alio post Platoniam rerum revolutionem*) (*Protogaea* §44; Leibniz is speaking specifically only about peat).

³⁵ See “De rerum originatione radicali,” GP VII, 302–308 at 303; translated as “On the Ultimate Origination of Things,” in Leibniz: *Philosophical Essays*, pp. 149–155 at 150.