

LIMBO AND THE CHILDREN OF *FAERIE*

Andrew Pinsent

ABSTRACT

The fate of the ungraced innocents highlights much of what has been most difficult about the doctrine of original sin. As an alternative to the extremes of an easy-going universalism or consignment to the fires of hell, this paper re-examines Aquinas's claims about a possible state of ungraced natural flourishing, arguing that this state is richer and more interesting than the name 'limbo' implies. The paper also applies recent work in philosophy and psychology, especially on the second-person perspective, to understand better the state of those in limbo, who might be better called the 'children of *faerie*'. It concludes by examining the possible relationship of the children of *faerie* and the children of God in a post-resurrection state.

I. "The sense is hard to me"

Consider the following influential speculation about the fate of those who die with no sin except original sin:

For there be some that are withdrawn from the present light, before they attain to show forth the good or evil deserts of an active life. And whereas the sacraments of salvation do not free them from the sin of their birth, at the same

time that here they never did aright by their own act, there they are brought to torment. And these have one wound, namely to be born in corruption, and another, to die in the flesh. But forasmuch as after death there also follows death eternal, by a secret and righteous judgment ‘wounds are multiplied to them without cause.’ For they even receive everlasting torments who never sinned by their own will.¹

The notion of everlasting torments, described here as without cause, has long seemed the most repugnant claim in some of the patristic writings on original sin. One reading of Dante’s response to the words over the gate of hell, “Their sense is hard to me (*il senso lor m’è duro*),”² is that it is hard to reconcile the justice and love of God with the doctrine of damnation, even for those who have in some sense chosen to be lost. What about the fate (and the implications of the fate) of those dead who never received the grace of baptism and had no opportunity to make choices for good or evil? Are these unfortunates also lost forever? Do they suffer the pain of this loss? Do these exemplars of ‘pure nature’ suffer actual punishment even if, as Augustine conceded, their pain is of the mildest kind?³

Such questions are scarcely the only ones regarding original sin, but they highlight much of what has been most difficult about the doctrine in its undiluted form, given that they concern the state and fate of human beings suffering from original sin alone. Even for a single soul without any choice in the matter, the notion of everlasting torments seems unanswerably horrific. The challenge is rendered even more severe (if that is possible) by considering the sheer numbers of people who could conceivably face such a fate. By far the majority of persons who have never chosen to sin die without baptism, especially if one includes the uncountable multitude of men and women who are conceived but never born. In such cases, how is it possible to reconcile

God's salvific will for all human beings (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4) with the need for baptism, or at least the grace of baptism, in order to be freed from original sin and be saved (cf. Mark 16:16; Matthew 28:18-19)?⁴ It is no wonder that such questions have attracted theological, philosophical and broader public interest to the present day.

In the absence of explicit teaching from the sources of revelation, commentators throughout the centuries have offered an unusually wide spectrum of answers. Extrapolating from their assessment of the depravity of the world, and mindful of challenges to Christian teaching about baptism (notably the Pelagian heresy), many patristic writers offered the kind of tough-minded response illustrated in the opening citation, variants of which can be found to the present day.⁵ By this interpretation, dead ungraced innocents join the unrepentant sinners in hell, even if in a relatively mild form of hell.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, others have drawn inspiration from instances of grace being received by extraordinary means, such as those recognised as 'Holy Innocents' who were murdered by Herod in his desire to kill Christ (Matthew 2:16–18). By extending these extraordinary means to all other innocents who have no chance of baptism, or by some appeal to universal salvation, it can then be argued that the ultimate fate of the unbaptised infants does not differ essentially from that of the baptised innocents, namely that they will all enjoy the vision of God in heaven.⁶

Finally, there is a long tradition regarding a possible state called 'limbo' that is not in heaven and which, being permanent, is technically part of hell, or at least the border or edge (*limbus*) of hell. Despite its infernal associations, however, limbo is not a place of punishment and may even

be a kind of paradise, as in the case of Dante's portrayal of limbo as the Elysian Fields of antiquity.⁷

Lacking any straightforward way to narrow down the options for how permanently ungraced innocents (if they exist) will spend eternity, it is not uncommon to express agnosticism regarding their fate or to deny the problem altogether, as in the case of those who deny original sin.⁸

Agnosticism, however, cannot be regarded as a wholly satisfying response, especially as the fate of the ungraced innocents is interwoven with so many other theological issues. Moreover, the denial of original sin is scarcely without its own problems. Even if one sets aside all the claims of theology, the fact remains that human beings show a depressingly consistent bent towards evil when constraints on behaviour are removed, as shown in cases of social breakdown and in the virtual worlds of recent human invention.⁹ The denial of the doctrine of original sin does not do away with the need to assign some name to the root of these tendencies, or the desire to speculate about the destiny of those die with this root intact, even if they lack any of the dark fruits of sin and vice that it customarily engenders.

Within the theological framework of the existence of original sin and need for the grace of baptism, is it possible to shed further light on these matters? In this paper, I re-examine the approach taken by Thomas Aquinas to the fate of the ungraced innocents, especially the detailed analysis in his work on evil (*QDM*) qq.4 and 5. The account of Aquinas represents a high water mark, over a span of more than a millennium, in terms of a positive assessment of the fate of the ungraced innocents, while still maintaining a certain distinction between their fate and that of the saints.¹⁰ Aquinas's reputation and his approach to this problem therefore suggest that his insights are worth revisiting, especially in the light of new developments in psychology and the philosophy of religion.

II. Aquinas and limbo

Aquinas's principal claims about original sin and its punishment are most easily summarised by listing the conclusions to his arguments. In *QDM* q.4, on original sin generally, these conclusions are: (a.1) it is not impossible for sin to be contracted by way of origin (and so the possibility of original sin is not ruled out *a priori*); (a.2) that original sin is not simply concupiscence, or ignorance, or the absence of 'original justice,' or a penalty or fault, although it has aspects of all of these defects; (a.3) that original sin is in the soul as its subject; (a.4) that original sin is first in the essence of the soul, not the powers of the soul; (a.5) that it is first in the will, rather than the other powers; (a.6) that it is transmitted from Adam to all who seminally derive from him; (a.7) that if any originate from Adam only by way of matter, they would not contract original sin; and (a.8) that the sins of near-ancestors are not transmitted to their posterity by way of origin. In *QDM* q.5, which examines the punishment of original sin, Aquinas adds that: (a.1) deprivation of the vision of God is a fitting punishment for original sin; (a.2) that the punishment of sense is not incurred for original sin; (a.3) that those who die only with original sin do not suffer interior pain; (a.4) that death and other punishments in this life are a punishment for original sin; and (a.5) that death and other such defects are not natural to man.

Even a cursory glance at these conclusions reveals some striking (though diplomatically worded) divergences from the received sense of much of the patristic tradition, most notably the way in which Aquinas broadens and softens the statements of Gregory and Augustine to the point that he does not attribute *any* pain of sense or of loss to the eternity of the ungraced innocents (q.5, a.2). A close reading of the texts reveals that the contrasting approach of Aquinas rest on two distinctions that were still imprecise in the patristic period. First, Aquinas emphasises the difference between a fault of nature (*vitium naturae*) and the fault of a person (*vitium*

personae), with original sin placed in the former rather than the latter category.¹¹ On the basis of this distinction, Aquinas claims that human beings contract original sin by physical descent but without personal fault, illustrating this claim by comparing the unity of the human race to the union of the parts of a body in a single action. For example, the motion of a hand that commits homicide can impress a certain effect on the hand, insofar as a hand can only be considered to be living as such as part of a living human being, but the hand cannot itself be regarded as personally culpable.¹² Aquinas argues that original sin similarly impresses an effect on human nature. When any rational soul created by God participates in this nature by descent, the effect is like a ray of the sun passing into a contaminated region and being darkened.¹³

Nevertheless, as in the case of the hand considered in itself, there is no personal sin attributed to individuals who contract this fault, a distinction with consequences for eternity, since,

... punishment is proportioned to fault; and therefore to actual mortal sin, in which there is a turning away from an unchangeable good and a turning towards a transitory good ... (but) in original sin there is not a turning-to, but only a turning-away, or something corresponding to turning-away, namely the soul's abandonment of original justice; and therefore the punishment of sense is not attributed to original sin but only the punishment of loss, namely deprivation of the vision of God.¹⁴

Aquinas claims in this passage that even though original sin deprives a person of the vision of God, the punishment of sense is not imputed except on account of actual sin. Hence Aquinas argues that ungraced innocents do not suffer any pain of sense in eternity.

A second important distinction that was not so clearly defined by patristic writers is grounded on an appropriation of Aristotelian philosophy that only became possible long after the patristic era. This distinction is between what is natural or pertains to human nature (*naturalis*) and a life of grace that is above or beyond human nature (*supernaturalis*). Aquinas outlines the basic thesis of this distinction in the *Summa theologiae* (*ST*), most clearly in his account of the theological virtues,

Human happiness, however, is twofold ... One is proportionate to human nature, a happiness that man can obtain by means of his natural principles. The other is a happiness surpassing human nature, and which man can obtain by divine power (virtue) alone, by a kind of participation of the Godhead, about which it is written (2 Peter 1:4) that by Christ we are made “partakers of the divine nature.”¹⁵

According to Aquinas, the notion of partaking in the divine nature that is cited here involves a transformation of human nature into the life of grace, a life that has its own special infused virtues and gifts. Only with this transformation can human beings live in the hope of seeing God.

What then does it mean for someone to live a natural life without grace? In *QDM*, Aquinas draws attention to the natural human incapacity to attain the supernatural end of grace:

Hence the Apostle says in the First Epistle to the Corinthians 2:9 that, “Eye has not seen nor ear heard neither has it entered into the human heart, what things God has prepared for those who love him,” and afterwards [in verse ten], he adds “But to us God has revealed them through his Spirit,” which revelation pertains to faith.¹⁶

In this passage, the references to the unseeing eye and the unhearing ear emphasise that the flourishing of the saints is beyond natural knowledge, and the reference to the things prepared by God not entering the human heart suggests also that this flourishing is beyond natural desire.

On this basis, Aquinas argues that,

... the souls of children [without the grace of baptism] do not know that they are deprived of such a good, and do not grieve on account of this; but this knowledge which they have by nature, they possess without grief.¹⁷

The exemption from the sense of loss described in this text is not because these children are sunk into a darkness of ignorance generally. Aquinas rejects this possibility by adding that, “it is not reasonable that these souls would suffer any loss in natural goods,”¹⁸ which includes the knowledge proper to a separated soul. Instead, the reason for this exemption is that such children do not know or desire God in the way that is possible in the life of grace. Postponing consideration of what, precisely, is meant by this life of grace, Aquinas’s main point is clear: those who die in this state of pure nature, without grace and without actual sin, have no pain of sense and no pain of loss.

Instead of burning in the flames of hell, the ultimate fate of the ungraced innocents in Aquinas’s account diverges radically, therefore, from the received sense of influential speculations of the patristic tradition. These souls enjoy all the good things that they desire naturally, do not suffer, do not die, and have natural knowledge, presumably including natural knowledge of God.¹⁹ According to other texts in Aquinas’s work, these innocents can also look forward to a final resurrection at the perfect age of about thirty years old.²⁰ This fate does not seem too dreadful, drawing the sting of what seems most objectionable about the tough-minded

claims of the patristic age. Moreover, unlike the sighing souls in the shadows of Dante's well-appointed limbo, or those whose gaze towards God is blocked by an impenetrable ceiling of rock in Enguerrand Quarton's depiction of eternity, these ungraced innocents do not have any natural desire for the supernatural or other unrequited desires.²¹ From the perspective of those with grace, this state is deficient in some sense, but does not seem deficient to those who are in it. On the contrary, one can be in Aquinas's limbo, it seems, and call it paradise, without any sense of loss or deprivation.

Prior to examining the possibilities of this state in more detail, it is worth anticipating an objection.²² Since at least the work of Henri de Lubac, it has sometimes been thought that Aquinas denies the possibility of natural completion without grace, on the grounds that all human beings have a natural desire for the supernatural end of knowing and loving God.²³ I do not intend to address this issue here beyond stating the following. Whatever Aquinas writes elsewhere, in *QDM* qq.4-5 he clearly considers a state of ungraced and complete natural flourishing to be a coherent possibility. Other texts that apparently deny such a possibility, notably *ST* 1a2ae, q.3, a.8, are intended, I think, to deny a stable natural end for those who grow to maturity in the present world. Given also the recent and detailed rebuttals of de Lubac's arguments, notably by Lawrence Feingold, there is no reason, therefore, not to proceed with a deeper examination of the natural flourishing described in *QDM* qq.4-5.²⁴

III. The children of *faerie*

Aquinas offers a strikingly positive account of the fate of the ungraced innocents compared to the received sense of some important patristic writings, but his account still raises the question of why there should be any difference between their fate and that of the saints. Assuming that God

wants everyone to enjoy the beatific vision who is capable of doing so, and assuming also that grace is not a mere token of admission to the presence of God, like a ‘Get Out of Jail Free’ card in a game, then grace must presumably do something to enable this vision. What then does grace do, and what does the absence of grace mean for the ungraced innocents in terms of their relationship to God and to others?

One approach to these questions is to begin by considering the root cause of separation from God. Eleonore Stump has written extensively about this problem in *Wandering in Darkness* and I assume her approach here as the starting point of my argument. The principle of Stump’s approach is as follows, namely that Aquinas’s account of the nature of love requires two interconnected desires: (1) the desire for the good of the beloved; and (2) the desire for union with the beloved.²⁵

Many details are needed to clarify the meaning of these desires. What is most relevant here to the issue of separation from God, however, is that a desire for the good of the beloved and for union with the beloved cannot be fulfilled simply by the unilateral will of the one who loves:

... Paula does not have sole control over whether or not she is close to Jerome.

If Jerome is not integrated within himself, then Paula’s ability to be close to him is limited or inefficacious, no matter what she chooses to do. This point holds even if it is God’s closeness to Jerome, rather than Paula’s, that is at issue.²⁶

The problem Stump highlights in this text is that union among friends requires significant personal presence and mutual closeness, but genuine mutual closeness to a person requires that person to be integrated around goodness. If a first person desires not to have the desires he has,

so that he is internally divided, the second person will always be distant from some part of the first person, and the first person will also, in an analogous or extended sense, fail to be close to himself.²⁷

On Stump's account, moral wrongdoing is sufficient for this self-alienation, since a person cannot be integrated around anything other than goodness. Hence a first person who is does wrong or has the disposition to do wrong is not someone with whom a second person can be fully united. For regeneration to begin, what is needed is that the person who is in this divided state, and who does not yet have a good will, at least has a "global higher-order desire for a will that wills the good".²⁸ But how is this state attained, given that a good will cannot be willed by a will that is not already good? Stump's ingenious response is that the will can be in a quiescent state, like a child ceasing to resist a painful medical injection. In this quiescent state, God infuses what is required for regeneration.

Without disputing any of the essentials of this account, which is far more detailed and subtle in its original form, I suggest that there is an implicit distinction in this process of regeneration that needs to be made explicit in order to understand the state of ungraced innocence. Stump refers to the infusion of grace following on from quiescence of the will, but does not emphasise the separation of these two events that may occur in practice. As an example, Stump mentions the famous account of Augustine weeping in a garden as the beginning of a process that brought an end to the divisions in his will, an event that took place sometime in 386.²⁹ Augustine's baptism, however, took place on 24 April 387, and according to Augustine's theology, it was baptism that really mattered for his salvation. As this case shows, the infusion of grace in the salvific sense follows quiescence, but these two events are often separated in time, underlying the possibility of a period during which there is nothing to drive a person away from God, and

yet the person is not united with God. If this quiescent state is possible for adults who have a history of moral wrongdoing, it seems even more possible for children who have never had any internal fragmentation of desire, or the associated shame and guilt.

Given that a quiescent state is possible, what is it like? The characteristics can be clarified by considering again what is needed for closeness to other persons. Stump presents the case of a human person, Paula, who is alienated from Jerome due to Jerome's disintegrated will. Once the impediment due to this disintegrated will is removed, then closeness between Jerome and Paula becomes possible simply because human beings have natural faculties for interpersonal communication. The existence of such faculties is self-evident. Most human beings are born with strong dispositions for interpersonal communication, as can be seen in the way in which babies identify faces within a very short time of being born and engage in reciprocal smiling.³⁰ As children grow up, they manifest a wide range of behaviours such as pointing and turn-taking that express shared awareness of shared focus with other persons. Such awareness, generally classified as 'joint attention', engenders a sense of union in which a first person 'I' naturally addresses a second person as 'you'.³¹ For this reason and others, joint attention may also be described as *second-person relatedness*.³² Provided there is no impediment, such as a disintegrated will, second-person relatedness may develop finally into friendship.

In the text cited above, Stump transposes this pattern of human closeness to that of closeness to omnipotent God, but there is an important distinction between these cases. As noted above, human persons have strong dispositions to relate to other human persons as 'I to 'you', and there is accumulating evidence for specific neural conditions and concomitants of such relatedness. Examples include neuronal activity that correlates with face cognition,³³ neural processes that correlate with hearing the sound of human voices,³⁴ and neural regions that influence sensitivity

to prosody as way of sharing a psychological stance.³⁵ The implication is that embodied human persons are, one might say, ‘hard-wired’ for second-person relatedness with other embodied human persons and usually manifest this fact from a very early age.

By contrast, how is it possible to be close to God? Without special divine action, we do not see God with our eyes, hear God with our ears, or touch God with our hands. As Aristotle argued, God is unlike us, and friendship between God and human beings is impossible for unaided human nature.³⁶ As noted previously, Aquinas concurs with this assessment, namely that human beings cannot by nature alone be close to God. For friendship to be possible, God needs to infuse certain divine gifts associated with the grace of baptism. Only with these gifts, which can be interpreted as enabling joint attention with God, is second-person relatedness to God possible, culminating in friendship.³⁷ This claim is consistent with a striking change in grammar in the transition from classical to early Christian texts. For example, Aristotle only uses third-person grammatical forms to describe God, but Augustine also addresses God using second-person forms, as in his famous exclamation, “Late have I loved you!”³⁸

What then is a state of innocent quiescence like that is not alienated from God through wrongdoing but lacks second-person relatedness to God because of an absence of the requisite gifts? Drawing from a popular film produced by Steven Spielberg, the idea was suggested to me at one time that these ungraced innocents might be thought of as ‘sinless gremlins’, namely as vicious creatures that just happen to be liquidated before they have the opportunity to do any harm.³⁹ Beyond this life, if you had the opportunity to decide their fate, you would not wish to punish such creatures since they have done no wrong. On the other hand, you would not want to keep with them with you and your children in your home. Instead, you would try to make them as comfortable as possible outside.

Aquinas, however, would dispute the notion that this state of unbaptised innocence is actually vicious as opposed to being disposed to become vicious. A person in this state might be better described as having a tendency to fall into wrongdoing due to the absence of grace, like a barrel of wine without its hoops, or a spurred horse without its bridle.⁴⁰ Moreover, on the basis of Stump's analysis, there is nothing about this state that involves an actual rejection of God, but simply an inability to respond to God in certain ways. Hence there is no obvious reason, it seems, for these persons to be separated from the saints. What then does the absence of grace mean for the ungraced innocents in terms of their relationship to God and to others?

On this basis of the preceding analysis, the crucial point of distinction is that the ungraced innocents do not have second-person relatedness to God, as 'I' to 'you'. But what is it like to be lack the capacity for joint attention or second-person relatedness? The issue in question here is the mode of relating to other persons, but the only persons with whom human beings typically interact are other human persons. Hence if there is a metaphor for what it means to lack second-person relatedness to God, the only possibility for finding such a metaphor is to examine potential parallels in human social interactions. This task is inherently challenging, however, for the reason noted previously: human beings typically have strong, innate dispositions for second-person relatedness, and human social interactions are typically saturated with many diverse kinds of joint attention.

A surprise in recent years, however, has been to discover that joint attention between human persons is sometimes inhibited or atypical even when the persons are together and otherwise capable of interaction. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, atypical or inhibited second-person relatedness is a condition closely associated with *autistic spectrum disorder* (ASD), a condition that is also linked with difficulties in developing language, notably difficulties with grasping the

proper use of second-person modes of grammar.⁴¹ Those with ASD have no difficulty in identifying the presence of a person as a distinct category of being in the world, and hence are perfectly capable of third-person descriptions. By contrast, to a greater or lesser degree, they are not moved readily to align with others in the sense of participating in their psychological stance towards objects of attention. This lack of alignment is manifested physically in a comparative absence of joint attention activities such as pointing.⁴² Those with ASD, some of whom prefer to be called autistics, are sometimes described as living in the midst of persons but not ‘seeing’ persons, even though this claim is incorrect if interpreted literally.⁴³

By the parallel with autism in human relations, I propose therefore that the state of pure nature, in which someone has no present or past moral wrongdoing but lacks the dispositions for second-person relatedness to God, could be described by the metaphor of *spiritual autism in relation to God*.⁴⁴ The state of limbo, a state of ungraced perfection that lacks nothing from the perspective of someone in that state, would therefore appear *spiritually autistic* from the perspective of the life of grace.

This claim requires some very careful clarifications. First, the ‘autism’ of spiritual autism is metaphoric, not literal, just as physical blindness has been used for millennia as a metaphor for a lack of spiritual understanding but without implying that the physically blind are thereby spiritually deficient. In the context of Aquinas’s theological anthropology, the metaphor merely provides a way to grasp a sense of what is absent in the state of limbo from a divine perspective. A child with original sin may know that his divine parent is present in an objective or third-person sense, while lacking the capacity to relate to the parent in a second-person sense. This interpretation, incidentally, resonates with the scriptural account of Genesis 3:9 (cf. Job 38:4), recounting the first question that the Lord God asks Adam after the fall, namely, “Where are

you?” God cannot, presumably, lose people in the third-person sense of knowing where they are in time and space, but can lose second-person relatedness to persons who have deliberately relinquished the disposition to respond to divine love.

Second, spiritual autism in this context is a metaphor drawn from an extrapolation of ASD taken to an extreme condition, which is probably never found in practice, and in which second-person relatedness is severed. By contrast, a complete absence of second-person relatedness to human persons is rarely, if ever, true of physical ASD. In practice, ASD covers a very broad spectrum, and some form of joint attention is almost always possible.

Third, the use of the phrase ‘spiritual autism’ should not be taken as implying anything exceptional, since spiritual autism is not the condition of a minority but is as universal as the original sin to which it is attributed. Nor should this term be taken as implying that those with physical ASD are in an unusually disadvantaged spiritual state. Understanding the spiritual experience of the autistic remains a daunting challenge, but autism in itself is a state of innocence, and one that is not without at least some spiritual advantages. In particular, since it has been argued that ‘sin’ can function as a pseudo-second-personal agent, parasitical upon a person’s capacity for second-person relatedness, those with ASD may also, in effect, be partially or wholly shielded from many kinds of moral wrongdoing.⁴⁵

What then would it be like to be in a condition of spiritual autism to God at the resurrection, but otherwise to be in a state of complete natural perfection? First, this state is not one of regret. In the present world of time, God clearly desires to share grace with those who do not have it, and to advance in merit those who do have it. At the resurrection of the dead, however, friendship with God and the beatific vision is something that the saints share in unequally,

according to their merits. Yet the general sense of Christian tradition is also that no one who receives this vision is dissatisfied or left with a sense of incompleteness (a common, albeit somewhat misleading, picture of these differences being in terms of the capacities of different-sized containers, all of which are full).⁴⁶ As noted previously, Aquinas explicitly extends the same claim to the state of the unbaptised innocents, namely that they have no unsatisfied desire to see God. Whether in a state of limbo or in heaven, it is impossible to regret one's fate, since one's capacity for happiness is completely satisfied.

Second, there are many aspects of the resurrected state of glory in the Christian tradition that do not require direct second-person relatedness to God. According to Aquinas, as noted previously, those in this condition enjoy all the good things that they desire naturally, do not suffer, do not die, and are resurrected at the perfect age. Beyond these benefits, broadly consistent with the Elysian Fields of the classical imagination, there is no obvious reason why God would deny any of the goods of the economy of salvation that are within the capacity of all innocents. Christian tradition implies that, after the general resurrection, such goods include the knowledge and company of Jesus Christ in his human nature, the Mother of God, and all others who are resurrected but not damned.

Third, the lack of an ability to know God as 'you' to 'I' does not exclude a rich diversity of other knowledge of God by signs, metaphors, propositions, and indirect communication. In particular, an inability to see God does not prevent an ungraced innocent from seeing those who see the face of God, assuming the perfection of natural faculties and a physical resurrection. As noted previously, Dante offers a slightly different account of limbo from that of Aquinas. Nevertheless, this line of reasoning has poetic parallels in the interaction of Virgil and Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*,

Among those was I who are in suspense,
 And a fair, saintly Lady called to me
 In such wise, I besought her to command me.
 Her eyes where shining brighter than the Star;⁴⁷

In these verses, Virgil, who lacks grace, sees the face of one who sees God and also perceives some effects of this vision, just as the saints mediate signs of the fruitfulness of grace in the present world. Hence it seems possible, or at least not impossible, that the saints can mediate some effects of the beatific vision in the post-resurrection life. An appealing corollary is that those who can still make choices about grace have something positive to offer those in limbo, provided they reach heaven themselves. The greater the number and kinds of saints, the greater the glory of reflected beatitude that these innocents can receive, like adding flowers to a garden or colours to a spectrum.

What these observations add up to is a state that is clearly different from that of the saints, but not a matter of regret or isolation. What, then, would this state be like from the perspective of those who share in this condition? Whatever the limitations of ASD as a metaphor, some autistics have made essentially the same point about ASD that Aquinas makes about the completeness of the state of natural flourishing in limbo, in which there is no unfulfilled desire. Autistic advocate Jim Sinclair has written,

Autism isn't something a person has, or a 'shell' that a person is trapped inside. There's no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate

the autism from the person—and if it were possible, the person you’d have left would not be the same person.⁴⁸

Although Sinclair raises issues here that remain contested, his account underlines how he does not see himself as trapped. This perspective may offer a corrective to traditional images of limbo being a prison of dreariness, shadows, unrequited desires or noble regret. Moreover, just as autistics have a way of being that is open to many experiences that others overlook, ungraced innocents may make their own unique contributions to post-resurrection glory.

What, then, would this state be like from the perspective of those who do have grace? On this account, the saints cannot enjoy with them shared awareness of shared focus on God, in union with God, although that does not preclude shared awareness of shared focus on created things in glory. The situation is one in which second-person relatedness is possible but limited.

As an imperfect metaphor of what limited second-person relatedness might be like, consider the following observations from *The Siege*, the autobiography of a mother bringing up an autistic child. Clara Claiborne Park describes her child as one who “looked through human beings as if they were glass,” a phrase that may parallel the inability of those in limbo to ‘see’ God, not simply as a cause, but as ‘you’ to ‘I’.⁴⁹ As she grows up, her child has difficulty understanding the subtle language of faces and bodies, and therefore has an “inability to interpret the social world”.⁵⁰

A possible application of these observations is that the ungraced innocents lack insight into what one might call the social world of heavenly glory. As noted previously, however, even the saints see God in diverse degrees and ways, expressed in Dante’s *Paradiso* by the image of the different circles of heaven. Hence rather than the ungraced innocents being uniquely limited,

they may, together with the saints, form part of a much more variegated society than is commonly supposed. Moreover, even a life that lacks the direct vision of God should not be thought of merely in terms of limits, especially as these innocents have never known sin. In *The Siege*, Park describes her child Elly as having a “fairy lightness in her movements ... a fairy purity in her detached gaze,” and mentions the strange integrity of a life that is remote but serene, detached, in perfect equilibrium and untouched by malice.⁵¹

These observations may provide the best way to sum up Aquinas’s teaching on limbo in a few words, reinterpreted in this paper in the light of new work in philosophy and psychology. Park’s repeated use of the word ‘fairy’ suggests a way to rescue the reputation of limbo from its connotations of bleakness and isolation, especially when the misused term ‘fairy’ is replaced by the medieval term ‘*faerie*’ to recover its rich mythological connotations. The word *faerie* conveys the notion of a state of innocence and of preternatural gifts, to which are added various blessings of salvation that are distinct from those of the saints but exceed mere Aristotelian natural flourishing. Moreover, this state does not need to be one of loneliness, even if it lacks the capacity for the direct vision of God. There is no obvious reason why the children of God should not love and be with the children of *faerie*, just as, at the very end of her story, Park adds that her child’s brothers and sisters genuinely love her.⁵²

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NOTES

¹ The translation here is a slightly modified version of Pope Gregory I, *Morals on the Book of Job*, trans. anon., vol. II (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 9.32. The original text can be found in Pope Gregory I, *S. Gregorii Magni Moralia in Iob*, ed. Marcus Adriaen, vol. I. Libri I-X, Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina 143 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1979), 479. "Nonnulli etiam prius a praesenti luce subtrahuntur quam ad proferenda bona malaue merita actiuae uitae perueniant. Quos quia a culpa originis salutis sacramenta non liberant, et hic ex proprio nil egerunt, et illuc ad tormenta perueniunt. Quibus unum uulnus est corruptibiliter nasci, aliud carnaliter emori. Sed quia post mortem quoque aeterna mors sequitur, occulto eis iustoque iudicio etiam sine causa

uulnera multiplicantur. Perpetua quippe tormenta percipiunt et qui nihil ex propria uoluntate peccauerunt.”

² The words of Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto III, v.12., “il senso lor m’è duro,” have several possible and overlapping meanings, not all of which survive translation well. Dante the traveller may be expressing his difficulty in understanding or accepting the words over the gate of hell, or simply expressing his fear. The words may also echo the Vulgate version of John 6:60, “...durus est hic sermo...” which is translated in the Revised Standard Version as, “This is a hard saying.” For an overview of the issues, see the commentary on Canto III in Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday Books, 2001). For a convenient compilation of other commentaries, see also the Dante Lab, <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu>.

³ *Enchiridion ad Laurentium* 93; J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completa, Series Latina* (PL), vol. 40, 1845, 275. cf. *De pecc. mer.* 1.16.21 (CSEL 60, 20f.).

⁴ The theology and terminology of grace is quite complex, but in this paper ‘grace’ should be taken to mean ‘the grace of baptism’, also called ‘sanctifying grace’. For a description, see, for example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance With the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II*, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), paras. 1262–1274.

⁵ John Mullen, for example, makes use of Molinist reasoning to argue that human beings inherit genetic conceptions that make sin inevitable, and for which they are morally responsible. See John T. Mullen, “Can Evolutionary Psychology Confirm Original Sin?,” *Faith and Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2007): 273.

⁶ For a recent review of various approaches, see, for example, Michael Sharkey and Thomas Weinandy, eds., “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised,” in *International Theological Commission, Vol II: 1986-2007* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 353–400; note also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*., 1283, “With respect to children who have died without Baptism, the liturgy of the Church invites us to trust in God's mercy and to pray for their salvation.”

⁷ Dante portrays limbo as the Elysian Fields in *Inferno*, Canto IV.

⁸ A text often cited as an influential early denial of original sin is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, ou, De l'éducation* (1762) (Paris: Garnier frères, 1967), 111, “...il n’y a point de perversité originelle dans le cœur humain (there is no original perversity in the human heart).” As shall be seen, however, there is also a sense in which Aquinas likewise claims that there is no original defect of human nature *qua* nature.

⁹ See, for example, Jamie Bartlett, *The Dark Net* (William Heinemann, 2014).

¹⁰ Contrary to common prejudice, attitudes to the fate of the virtuous pagans and ungraced innocents did not progress smoothly from medieval severity to modern toleration, but achieved a high-water mark in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Many Christians in the seventeenth century took a hardline view (sometimes even more than Augustine) about pagan wickedness. See John Marenbon, *Pagans and Philosophers : The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 304.

¹¹ *QDM* q.5, a.2, c., “Ut autem ex praemissis patet, peccatum originale est vitium naturae, peccatum autem actuale est vitium personae.”

¹² *QDM* q.4, a.1 c., “Therefore just as homicide is not said to be the fault of the hand but of the whole man, so this defect [i.e. original sin] is not said to be a personal sin but a sin of the whole nature, nor does it pertain to the person except inasmuch as the nature infects the person (Sicut ergo homicidium non dicitur culpa manus, sed culpa totius hominis; ita huiusmodi defectus non dicitur esse peccatum personale, sed peccatum totius naturae; nec ad personam pertinet, nisi in quantum natura inficit personam).” In this chapter, the translations of *QDM* are based on Jean T. Oesterle, trans., *St. Thomas Aquinas On Evil* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). I have chosen to use slightly different terms in a few places, providing the Latin text in the footnotes.

¹³ *QDM* q.4, a.3, ad 3.

¹⁴ *QDM* q.5, a.2, c., “... poena proportionatur culpa et ideo peccato actuali mortali, in quo invenitur aversio ab incommutabili bono et conversio ad bonum commutabile debetur ... Sed in peccato originali non est conversio, sed sola aversio, vel aliquid aversioni respondens, scilicet destitutio animae a iustitia originali: et ideo peccato originali non debetur poena sensus, sed solum poena damni, scilicet carentia visionis divinae.”

¹⁵ *ST* 1a, q.62, a.1 c., “Est autem duplex hominis beatitudo sive felicitas ... Una quidem proportionata humanae naturae, ad quam scilicet homo pervenire potest per principia suae naturae. Alia autem est beatitudo naturam hominis excedens, ad quam homo sola divina virtute pervenire potest, secundum quandam divinitatis participationem; secundum quod dicitur II Petr. I, quod per Christum facti sumus consortes divinae naturae.” In this chapter, the translations of the *ST* are based on Thomas Aquinas, *The “Summa Theologica” of St. Thomas Aquinas, Literally Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (London: Burns, Oates

and Washbourne Ltd., 1911-1935). I have modified the translation in minor ways in a few places, providing the Latin text in the footnotes.

¹⁶ *QDM* q.5, a.3, c., “Unde apostolus dicit, I ad Cor. II, 9, quod nec oculus vidit, nec auris audivit, nec in cor hominis ascendit quae praeparavit Deus diligentibus se: et postea subdit: nobis autem revelavit Deus per spiritum suum: quae quidem revelatio ad fidem pertinet.”

¹⁷ *QDM*, q.5, a.3, c. “Et ideo se privari tali bono, animae puerorum non cognoscunt, et propter hoc non dolent; sed hoc quod per naturam habent, absque dolore possident.”

¹⁸ *QDM*, q.5, a.3, c. “...quia cum in pueris non sit peccatum actuale quod est proprie peccatum personale non debetur eis ut detrimentum aliquod patiantur in naturalibus bonis.”

¹⁹ Unlike contemporary philosophical discourse, in which God and matters pertaining to God are quite often classified as ‘supernatural,’ Aquinas regards at least some knowledge of God as natural to human beings and accessible to philosophical investigation, as illustrated by his famous five proofs for the existence of God (*ST* 1a, q.2, a.3).

²⁰ Aquinas argues for a common age of about thirty at the general resurrection in *In Sent.*, lib. 4, d.44, q.1, a.3, drawing inspiration principally from Ephesians 4:13.

²¹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto IV, vv.24-35. See also the extreme left-hand corner of Enguerrand Quarton, *The Coronation of the Virgin* (1452-53), in which the ungraced innocents are kneeling in a place of their own, without the flames of hell or of purgatory. Here they look up at heaven, but their vision is blocked by an impenetrable slab of rock, implying a state that is free of punishment but in which there is also permanent unrequited desire. Quarton’s painting represents a more positive vision of the fate of the ungraced innocents than that of many patristic

writers, but is still less positive than the account of Aquinas, who holds that these innocents have no unrequited desire.

²² I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for anticipating this objection.

²³ Henri de Lubac, *Le Mystère Du Surnaturel. Études Historiques*, 1st ed. (Paris: Aubier, 1946).

²⁴ The possibility of a wholly coherent ‘pure nature’ without the gift of sanctifying grace was one of the most controversial topics of Catholic theology in the twentieth century. For a recent and detailed study of the issues and how they relate to the work of Aquinas, see Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters*, 2nd ed. (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2010).

²⁵ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 91.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁷ As Stump explains, there are other dimensions to the problem. Besides an internal division of desires, a first person who has done wrong has a past, which engenders a desire to avoid or retreat from the presence of the second person, due to shame and to guilt. Such a state is not irreparable, and the story of this reparation is at the heart of the Christian Gospel, but the brief summary in the present paper already given suffices to show some of the complex consequences of moral wrongdoing as regards alienation from other persons.

²⁸ Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 165.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

³⁰ A. N. Meltzoff and M. K. Moore, “Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates,” *Science* 198 (October 7, 1977): 75–78.

³¹ Naomi Eilan et al., eds., *Joint Attention: Communication and Other Minds: Issues in Philosophy and Psychology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). The notion of joint attention as “sharing an awareness of the sharing of the focus” comes in particular from Peter Hobson’s chapter in this volume, “What puts Jointness into Joint Attention?,” p. 185, something, he adds, “that often entails sharing an attitude towards the thing or event in question.” Note that to address someone as ‘you’ does not, in itself, imply second-person relatedness in all particular instances, but rather that second-person relatedness is the usual context in which these grammatical forms naturally arise. Even God and Satan are depicted as being in dialogue in Job 1:7-2:6, using second-person grammatical forms, without implying that they share the kind of common stance associated with joint attention. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for anticipating this objection.

³² The uniqueness, importance and irreducibility of the ‘I’-‘you’ relation are principles associated with the pioneering work of Martin Buber, *Ich und Du*, 1st ed. (Leipzig: Insel-Verlang, 1923). In this paper, I use the term ‘relatedness’ rather than ‘relationship’ because joint attention may be something momentary, although also a plausible condition of relationships such as friendship. I am grateful to Peter Hobson for making this point to me in discussions.

³³ See, for example, J. Bodamer, “Die Prosop-Agnosie,” *Archiv Für Psychiatrie Und Nervenkrankheiten* 179 (1947): 6–53; Robert K. Yin, “Looking at Upside-down Faces,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 81, no. 1 (1969): 141–45; Peter Thompson, “Margaret Thatcher: A New Illusion,” *Perception* 9, no. 4 (1980): 483 – 484; D I Perrett et al., “Visual Cells in the

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³⁴ Pascal Belin, “‘Hearing Voices’: Neurocognition of the Human Voice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience*, ed. Jean Decety and John T. Cacioppo, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 378–93.

³⁵ Kenneth M Heilman, Susan A Leon, and John C Rosenbek, “Affective Aprosodia from a Medial Frontal Stroke,” *Brain and Language* 89, no. 3 (June 2004): 411–16.

³⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics (EN)* 10.8.1159a3–9.

³⁷ For an interpretation of Aquinas’s account of infused virtues and gifts in terms of joint attention, see Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (New York; Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).

³⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* 10.27.38, “Sero te amavi.”

³⁹ Joe Dante, *Gremlins* (Warner Bros., 1984).

⁴⁰ *QDM* q.4, a.2, ad 7. Note that on the basis of this approach, Aquinas diverges from the way that original sin is often imagined, namely in terms of a damaged or even changed human nature.

See, for example, Peter King, “Damaged Goods: Human Nature and Original Sin,” *Faith and Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (July 2007): 247–67.

⁴¹ Pinsent, *The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics*, 47–49. See also Helen Tager-Flusberg, “Dissociations in Form and Function in the Acquisition of Language by Autistic Children: Studies of Atypical Children,” in *Constraints on Language Acquisition: Studies of Atypical Children*, ed. Helen Tager-Flusberg (Hillsdale, N.J.; Hove: Erlbaum, 1994).

⁴² Hobson, ‘What Puts Jointness into Joint Attention?’

⁴³ Clara Claiborne Park, *The Siege: The First Eight Years of an Autistic Child (With an Epilogue, Fifteen Years After)* (Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), 56.

⁴⁴ Pinsent, *The Second Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics*, 100–102.

⁴⁵ Jim Sinclair, “Don’t Mourn for Us,” *Our Voice: The Newsletter of Autism Network International* 1, no. 3 (1993).

⁴⁶ Although a full bucket contains a far greater volume than a full thimble, the bucket is not more or less full than the thimble, since the fullness in each case is relative to the proper capacity of each container. Similarly, no saint has an incomplete happiness, in subjective terms, but some saints have a greater capacity for happiness than others, and hence their states are unequal, in objective terms, cf. *ST* 1a, q.12, a.6. Note that the diversity of the states of heaven, based on the diversity of the merits of the saints, gained formal doctrinal recognition at the Council of Florence (*Laetentur Coeli*) in 1439.

⁴⁷ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri* (London: G. Routledge, 1867), *Inferno*, Canto II, 52–55.

⁴⁸ Susan Eastman, “The Shadow Side of Second-Person Engagement: Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5, no. 4 (2013). I am grateful to Michael Waddell for bringing this article to my attention.

⁴⁹ Park, *The Siege*, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 320. I am grateful to Eleonore Stump and Michael Waddell for discussions of ideas that have contributed to this paper, as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.