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ARTICLE

Reframing Purgatory: An Issuantist Proposal Grounded in Aeveternity

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Abstract

In this paper, I present an analysis of purgatory from an issuantist perspective – an approach that seeks to reconcile the concept of a loving God with the doctrine of eternal hell. Issuantism posits that both heaven and hell originate from God's love, and I extend this framework to purgatory, offering a new interpretation of its eschatological significance. After examining the views of influential figures such as Joseph Ratzinger and Jerry Walls, I argue that purgatory must be understood as a condition outside of time to maintain theological consistency. I propose a model of purgatory located within an aeveternal dimension – an intermediate state between time and eternity – as a way to resolve tensions concerning temporality, moral agency, and the soul's orientation toward heaven.

Keywords: aeveternity; eschatology; issuantism; philosophical theology; purgatory

1. Introduction

Following the seminal work of French historian Jacques Le Goff, purgatory has received renewed attention from scholars regarding its historical origins, roles, and philosophical and theological implications.[1] Although its doctrine was often scorned by Protestant and Reformed circles due to the negative views expressed by Martin Luther

[1]Besides Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory* (Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1990), several scholars have explored the historical development and theological significance of purgatory: George Dameron, 'Purgatory and Modernity', in *Bridging the Medieval-Modern Divide, Medieval Themes in the World of the Reformation*, ed. by James Muldoon (Abingdon-on-Thames, Milton Park; New York: Routledge, 2013), for an analysis on the role of purgatory in the medieval economic development; Isabel Moreira, *Heaven's Purge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), for a revision of Le Goff's work, and particularly the role of Venerable Bede in the inception of purgatory's doctrine. Literature regarding different philosophical and theological aspects of purgatory is abundant, but a recent general analysis on the core role of purgatory can be seen in William Charlton, 'Purgatory', *New Blackfriars*, 102 (1099) (2021), 1–13. Some future prospects of research instead can be found in Travis Dumsday, 'Purgatory', *Philosophy Compass*, 9(10) (2014), 732–740.

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and John Calvin,[2] and even the influential Catholic theologian Karl Rahner deemed purgatory at best as a 'little harmless mythology',[3] recently the winds seem to have changed, as it has even been described by John Casey as one of the 'happiest inspirations of the Church of Rome'.[4] Additionally, Jerry Walls, an evangelical philosopher, has defended a reinterpreted version of purgatory as a means of afterlife sanctification.

The doctrine of purgatory, however, is part of a broader eschatological treatise. Therefore, understanding purgatory requires harmonizing it with a coherent account of hell and heaven. For instance, throughout its troubled inception, it was unclear whether purgatory should be considered a part of hell or heaven.[5] While Aquinas conceptualized it as more hellish,[6] the renowned poet Dante Alighieri portrayed purgatory in a more positive light, depicting it as a place of prayer and even hopeful penance. On mount Purgatory, chants and prayers fill the air:

> How different are these passageways from those
> of Hell! One enters here to music-there,
> below, to sounds of violent laments. (Purgatory XII:112-114)[7]

[2]Even though Martin Luther's opinion on purgatory evolved over time, he stated his more mature and vitriolic opinion about it in *The Smalcald Articles*, p. II, a. II,5 in Martin Luther, *Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989): 'Consequently purgatory and all the pomp, services, and business transactions associated with it are to be regarded as nothing else than illusions of the devil, for purgatory, too, is contrary to the fundamental article that Christ alone, and not the work of man, can help souls.' Calvin too associated the doctrine of purgatory to the works of Satan in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion – Vol. I* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 2006), Book III, Chapter V,6: '[S]ince purgatory is constructed out of many blasphemies and is daily propped up with new ones, and since it incites to many grave offenses, it is certainly not to be winked at. One could for a time perhaps in a way conceal the fact that is was devised apart from God's Word in curious and bold rashness; that men believed in it by some sort of "revelations" forge by Satans craft.' For a historical summary of protestant perspectives on purgatory, see Jerry Walls, *Purgatory – The Logic of Total Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 35–51.

[3]Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 17 (New York: Crossroad, 1981), p. 123.

[4]John Casey, *After Lives – A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 242.

[5]Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, pp. 204–205: 'Purgatory was attracted toward two poles: Paradise and Hell. It might have developed into either a near-paradise or a quasi-hell. At a very early date, Purgatory (in various rudimentary forms) veered toward the infernal pole, and it was a long time before it began to differentiate itself from Hell. Not before the thirteenth century – and in some accounts even later – did it become anything other than a shallow region of Hell in which souls were tormented not for eternity but for a specified length of time, an upper Gehenna.'

[6]Although Aquinas himself presented at least two locational accounts of purgatory, in *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote (Green Bay: Aquinas Institute, Inc., 2023) Supp., App. 1, a. 2. Moreover, Aquinas states in a. 3: 'In purgatory there are two punishments: one of loss, namely, inasmuch as souls are held back from the divine vision; the other, of sense, according as they are physically punished by fire. And in both, the least punishment of purgatory exceeds the greatest punishment of this life.' In a. 6, he excludes that demons punish the repentant souls, but they are not completely out of sight: 'nevertheless it is possible that they [the angels] lead them to places of suffering, and that even the demons themselves, who rejoice in the sufferings of men, accompany them and attend those to be purified, both so that they might be sated by their sufferings, and so that at the departure from the body, they might seize upon something of their own there'.

[7]Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy – Vol. II: Purgatory*, trans. Mark Musa (New York, London: Penguin Books, 1985).

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The poet depicts the souls of antepurgatory as well as the ones already ahead on the mount as directed assuredly toward beatific vision:

> 'O you elect who ended well your lives',
> Virgil began, 'I ask you, in the name
> of the same peace I know awaits you all'. (Purgatory III:73-75)

Traditionally, Dante's vision has been established as the prevailing perspective within the Church;[8] however, it does not address all the questions regarding the nature of purgatory. Some of these questions remain unanswered even today, such as the concept of time relative to purgatory and the relationship between purgatory and the various eschatological proposals that the Church has developed since its inception.

In recent decades, a growing number of philosophers and theologians have embraced issuantism,[9] a libertarian interpretation of eschatology that seeks to explain the relationship between the concept of God's goodness and the doctrine of hell. This perspective posits that both hell and heaven arise from the same divine love, and because of this, it also influences the doctrine of purgatory and its role for the imperfect but penitent sinners, as a demonstration of love from God to His faithful. Typically, issuantist authors understandably focused on the challenges presented by the existence of hell, and few depictions of purgatory are thought to be compatible with issuantism.

Thus, I will briefly explain the core premises of issuantism, present two explanations of purgatory that align with it, namely, those of Joseph Ratzinger and Jerry Walls, show their main characteristics and critical points, and then propose a revised interpretation of purgatory from an issuantist perspective. Then, to defend the heavenly direction of purgatory, I will argue that the situation of its souls is best construed as outside time, in a hybrid dimension known in the Thomistic tradition as aeveternity. This will show purgatory as not only a fortunate inspiration, but also as a theological necessity, particularly when viewed through the lens of issuantism.

[8]See, for instance, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Città del Vaticano; Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), n. 1030: 'All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.' The heavenly destination of purgatory is clearly underlined by the Catechism, as well as the state of grace, even if imperfect, of the penitents of purgatory.

[9]Some examples of explicitly or implicitly issuantist authors are: Clive S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Dublin: William Collins, 2015 reissue); Jerry Walls, *Hell – The Logic of Damnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Harvey J. Egan, 'Hell: The Mystery of Eternal Love and Eternal Obduracy', *Theological Studies*, 75(1) (2014), 52–73; Adrian J. Reimers, *Hell and the Mercy of God* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019). Though not expressed in full detail, an issuant definition of hell can also be found in Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988) 215–218, and in *Introduction to Christianity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 239: 'The depths we call hell man can only give to himself. Indeed, we must put it more pointedly: hell consists in man's being unwilling to receive anything, in his desire to be self-sufficient'.

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2. Basic issuantism

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God says, '*Thy* will be done'. All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock, it is opened.[10]

C.S. Lewis famously grappled with the concept of hell,[11] and in this illuminating passage from one of his masterworks, *The Great Divorce*, he encapsulates the fundamental characteristics of issuantism that Ramon Baker identifies as three main theses common to all issuant thinkers, which he refers to as 'basic issuantism'[12]: (1) the love of God as the source from which both heaven and hell originate; (2) a libertarian account of human freedom;[13] and (3) the rejection of hell as a form of retribution.

The first thesis is best articulated by Jonathan Kvanvig, who states, 'Any adequate account of hell must begin with an understanding of the nature of God and present the possibilities of heaven and hell as flowing from this one nature'.[14] If Christian revelation, as indicated in 1 John 4:16,[15] posits a God who is love in an ontological sense, then hell must be understood within this framework. It cannot merely be the result of another attribute of God, such as justice, because love is not just one attribute among others; it is the very essence of the divine. As Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, 'Hell is a *product* of the Redemption'.[16] This means that the Incarnation of the Son, along with the love that it embodies, inherently includes the possibility for humans to reject it. Following this perspective, hell is not just a place of mere suffering, but the logical consequence of both the Incarnation and the relative choice of humankind in regard to embracing this revelation or rejecting it.

More recently, Egan has also suggested that the love of God, as well as the love of the blessed, serves as the source of distress for the damned: 'Hell is the paradox that God, Christ (who died and rose even for the damned), the saints, and creation itself continue to love eternally even the condemned, and that this constitutes their torment'.[17] Thus, the dimension of God's wrath arises from the subjective experience of an eternal, completely free love that is rejected by the inhabitants of hell.[18]

This brings us to the second thesis, and thus the importance of freedom. As Lewis implied in the quote above, God's profound respect for our freedom is such that He is willing to be rejected by His creation. In *The Problem of Pain*, he powerfully illustrates this point with his often-quoted line: 'I willingly believe that the damned are, in one

[10]Clive S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Dublin: William Collins, 2015 reissue), p. 75.

[11]Clive S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 119: 'There is no doctrine which I would more willingly from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power'.

[12]For an in-depth analysis, see Ramon Baker, *Issuant Views of Hell in Contemporary Anglo-American Theology* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2014), pp. 71–118.

[13]What one can mean by the term libertarian, used in the moral sense, is a vast array of meanings which would bring us far from the topic of purgatory. For instance, whether Aquinas's account of freedom qualifies as libertarian remains a matter of debate; see Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 300–306. Nevertheless, Aquinas' consideration of free will is such that I would consider it compatible with the concept of freedom needed for the validity of this thesis.

[14]Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, p. 112.

[15]'God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him'.

[16]Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 174.

[17]Egan, 'Hell: The Mystery of Love', p. 66.

[18]Egan notes in 'Hell: The Mystery of Love', p. 73: 'Rejected love is experienced as wrath'.

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sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside. [...] They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved'.[19] Joseph Ratzinger also defends a similar perspective: 'What should we hold on to here? First, to the fact of God's unconditional respect for the freedom of his creature. What can be given to the creature, however, is love, and with this all its neediness can be transformed. [...] And yet the freedom to resist the creation of that assent, the freedom not to accept it as one's own, this freedom remains'.[20] Walls, in response to Talbott's argument that God might have reasons to interfere with our freedom – similar to how we sometimes believe we can intervene in the decisions of others, such as those with suicidal tendencies – states: 'My assumption, however, that a person should ultimately have the right, if he so chooses, to do himself irreparable harm obviously involves a strong commitment to the value of libertarian freedom. This value judgment is surely one of the main pillars of the orthodox Christian doctrine of hell, and indeed, I think the doctrine would topple without it'.[21] If the nature of God is love, and love cannot be extorted or forced, then freedom is a fundamental principle that God must grant us if He desires our participation in His essence through the beatific vision. Therefore, a coherent concept of hell necessitates a serious commitment to freedom, while also considering God's nature.

Following a more recent understanding of justice as rehabilitative and restorative,[22] proponents of issuantism find it difficult to reconcile retributive justice with the idea that God is love. If restorative justice seeks to treat criminals 'on the conviction that all persons deserve to be treated with some semblance of decency',[23] the problem of an infinite punishment for finite offenses imposed by an infinitely loving God arises. Consequently, the third thesis logically follows from the second to answer this problematic aspect. If we accept a libertarian view of free will, we can see how 'the suffering of hell is the natural consequence of living a life of sin rather than an arbitrarily chosen punishment'.[24] As Reimers states, '[the sinner] is damned, not because God has damned him but because he has chosen another god'.[25] Within issuantism, the justice of God is not perceived as a behavior that He enacts to punish the wicked; rather, it is understood as being consistent with His nature and the nature of sin, which involves choosing idols in place of Him. The unrepentant sinner chooses to distance themselves from God and, in doing so, also chooses to reject His love.[26] However, damnation is not less daunting, even if it is not the consequence of a direct condemnation. As Kvanvig notes, embracing a self-determination model of hell 'does not imply that hell is not a

[19]Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 130.
[20]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 216.
[21]Walls, *Hell*, p. 136.
[22]For an introduction on the issue, see Jennifer Furio, *Restorative Justice: Prison as Hell or a Chance for Redemption* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002). For a Catholic point of view on the issue, see *Redemption and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Restorative Justice*, eds by Trudy D. Conway, David Matzko McCarthy, Vicky Schieber, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017).
[23]Furio, *Restorative Justice*, p. 7.
[24]Walls, *Hell*, p. 150.
[25]Reimers, *Hell*, p. 170.
[26]In this regard, Reimers, *Hell*, p. 154: 'The Last Judgment is not about God's inflicting pain on those who broke his rules or who failed to join the right church or say the right kinds of prayers. It is about separating the merciful from those who had chosen against love. God is love, and to choose against love is to choose against God. [...] Having rejected the rule of mercy, they find none for themselves'.

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place of punishment. [...] One ends up in hell because of one's developed nature, and hell involves being deprived of the most significant good there is'.[27] The punishment, though, is self-inflicted rather than heteronomous.

Since 'basic issuantism' is just the common ground between different authors, each thinker differs in those that Baker refers to as 'supplements',[28] that is, additional theses proposed alongside the three main ones to coherently articulate their perspectives on hell. The three basic theses provide ample material for critics of issuantism, highlighting the necessity of offering complementary addenda.

One of the critiques of issuantism that requires a defense, given its libertarian commitment, is the fate of those who, through no fault of their own, lack free will or are unable to express their will to accept or reject the love of God. This tension not only highlights the necessity of purgatory within a libertarian eschatology, but also underscores the importance of developing a concept of purgatory that remains consistent with the other core commitments of issuantism. Such a reconciliatory model would allow purgatory to function not as an *ad hoc* addition, but as a theologically grounded and coherent supplement.

3. Two issuant-compatible views of purgatory

To develop a revision of an issuantist purgatory, I will now turn to two perspectives from thinkers who come from completely different backgrounds: former Pope Benedict XVI, whom I will refer to by his baptismal name since the material I will analyze predates his election to the papacy, and Jerry Walls, a Christian evangelical philosopher and author of an eschatological triad of books in which he examines the realities of hell, heaven, and purgatory from the perspective of issuantism.

3.1. Joseph Ratzinger's Christological purgatory

Ratzinger wrote an influential book on eschatology in 1977,[29] in which he outlined his fundamental approach to purgatory. After providing a brief overview of the historical challenges surrounding the concept of purgatory, he critiques the interpretations of 1 Corinthians 3:10-15[30] by German exegete Joseph Gnilka, who viewed the testing fire as 'the coming Lord himself',[31] thereby dismissing any purgatorial interpretation of the passage. Ratzinger, however, claims that to grasp the relevance of this Pauline passage for purgatory, we must understand purgatory through a Christological lens, 'in terms of the Lord himself as the judging fire that transforms us and conforms us to his own

[27]Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, p. 155.

[28]For a lengthy analysis of the different supplements, see Baker, *Issuant Views*, pp. 123–172.

[29]Ratzinger's *Eschatology* was published in 1977 in German. The English translation was published in 1988.

[30]'According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire (itself) will test the quality of each one's work. If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage'.

[31]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 228.

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glorified body'.[32] This intermediate state, situated between earthly life and heaven, represents not only an encounter with the Judge himself, as Gnilka believed, but also the offer of a purifying crucible for the repentant sinner.

Ratzinger emphasizes that purgatory is a transitional state; however, he is quite skeptical about inquiries regarding the temporal reality of purgatory, describing attempts to conceptualize it in physical terms as 'naive and unproductive'.[33] In his view, the question of purgatory's time is not concerned with its philosophical or physical aspects, but rather with the existential grounding of that experience in the *kairos* – specifically, what the encounter with the Judge evokes in the soul of the individual. This transformative process should not be understood as a place of torture or arbitrary punishments, '[r]ather is it the inwardly necessary process of transformation in which a person becomes capable of Christ, capable of God and thus capable of unity with the whole communion of saints'.[34]

This mandatory path of purification does not replace the grace of God; rather, it offers a means by which the sinner may experience that grace. This encounter with the Judge enables the sinner to recognize himself as 'the recipient of divine mercy, yet this does not exonerate him from the need to be transformed'.[35] Following Aquinas's renowned adage that 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it',[36] Ratzinger asserts that in the purifying encounter with the Lord, we are transformed, as He is 'the fire that burns away our dross and re-forms us to be vessels of eternal joy'.[37]

This experience, while not a solipsistic work, is deeply integrated into the life and loving demeanor of the Church. Ratzinger's personalistic view emerges clearly when he asserts that '[w]e are not just ourselves, or, more correctly, we are ourselves only as being in others, with others and through others'.[38] This perspective significantly influences his interpretation of the transitory state of purgatory, where the individual continues to be shaped to align with the Judge's model. It adds meaning to the intercession of the Church's prayers and penitential practices: 'self-substituting love is a central Christian reality, and the doctrine of Purgatory states that for such love the limit of death does not exist. The possibility of helping and giving does not cease to exist on the death of the Christian. Rather does it stretch out to encompass the entire communion of saints'.[39]

The Church can and does assist repentant sinners through its prayers, the offering of Masses, and acts of penance. Acknowledging the historically well-documented abuses that prompted legitimate grievances from Luther and other reformers, Ratzinger emphasizes the importance of prayer: 'What is important is the praxis of being able to pray, and being called upon to pray'.[40] Since the Church has prayed for the dead since its inception, it is essential for him to restore this understanding of

[32]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 229.
[33]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 230.
[34]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 230.
[35]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 231.
[36]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (Green Bay: Aquinas Institute, 2017) Ia, Q. 1, a. 8, ad. 2.
[37]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 231.
[38]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 232.
[39]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, pp. 232–233.
[40]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 233.

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purgatory in order to bridge the doctrinal divide between Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians.

As I have illustrated previously, issuantists interpret heaven and hell as originating from the same source: the love of God. In the case of heaven, this love is accepted; in the case of hell, it is denied. Ratzinger's concept of purgatory as primarily the encounter between the Judge and the judged fits well with the core tenets of the issuantist view of the eschatological future as a fruit of God's love, under a strong idea of free will,[41] and restorative justice.[42] God, in the Son, reveals His eternal loving attitude toward humanity; and for the contrite sinner, who freely turns to Him, this love purifies what remains of sin – namely, that which is not yet love.

3.2. Jerry Walls's purgatory as a second chance

Walls, as one of the pioneers of contemporary issuantism, deserves recognition for his systematic understanding of purgatory, which has been consciously integrated through an issuant perspective. Since Walls's arguments regarding purgatory are quite articulate, I will highlight three main ways in which his reasoning is relevant to the task at hand: first, the crucial role of freedom in the sanctification process; second, the reasonableness of optimal grace; and third, the interpretation of purgatory as a second chance, which complements basic issuantism.

The role of freedom in an individual's eternal destiny is a hallmark of any issuantist eschatology. Walls underscores its importance, which is relevant not only theologically but also ecumenically:

> The doctrine of purgatory is plausible not only for Roman Catholics and adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy but also for Protestants. For those who take freedom seriously and believe that transformation is the heart of what salvation is all about, it seems to be a fully natural doctrinal development. Indeed, believers of all traditions who have experienced as joy the purging involved in drawing closer to Christ can affirm purgatory as a gracious gift of love.[43]

Analyzing and expanding upon an argument originally developed by Justin Barnard,[44] Walls asserts that either God respects our freedom and its significance in our sanctification process, both in life and in death, or an evidential argument from evil can

[41]Ratzinger's commitment to a strong idea of free will is evident in his comments about hell, as I have pointed out before, and as it is clear in *Eschatology*, p. 216: 'Christ, descends into Hell and suffers it in all its emptiness, but he does not, for all that, treat man as an immature being deprived in the final analysis of any responsability for his own destiny. Heaven reposes upon freedom, and so leaves to the damned the right to will their own damnation'.

[42]Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, p. 230: 'Purgatory is not, as Tertullian thought, some kind of supra-worldly concentration camp where man is forced to undergo punishment in a more or less arbitrary fashion'.

[43]Walls, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 62. Walls reiterates this in *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*, 2011, p. 57: 'If God takes our freedom seriously in his work of transforming us in this life, it is reasonable to think he will continue to do so in the next. In short, purgatory is a perfectly rational theological inference for those who take seriously the role of human freedom in salvation'.

[44]Justin Barnard, 'Purgatory and the dilemma of sanctification', *Faith and Philosophy* 24(3) (2007), pp. 311–330.

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be raised: Why does God not perfect us instantly in our earthly lives if He is capable of doing so afterward?[45] This implies that even if we do not recognize it, God values and 'takes our freedom most seriously, as well as our cooperation in the sanctification process'.[46]

Additionally, to address the questions regarding the relationship between grace and salvation, as well as the distribution of grace, Walls builds upon the concept of optimal grace that he introduced in his treatise on hell.[47] Under the notion of optimal grace, purgatory can be viewed not merely as an astute invention: 'properly understood, [it] is not an alternative to grace, but is itself an expression of grace'.[48] For Walls, purgatory can serve as the moment in which God extends grace in the optimal manner that, for contingent reasons, could not reach certain individuals, such as unborn babies or adults who lived chronologically or spatially before Christ and, therefore, could not hear the gospel.[49] Walls is confident that the extension of optimal grace through purgatory offers a reason to hope that it 'will shatter the illusions of sin for countless persons in the long run'.[50]

Closely related to the previous point is the interpretation of purgatory as a second chance. Walls critiques the notion that purgatory can only be understood as a second chance for repentance to dig deeper into an individual's soul,[51] arguing against the objections to viewing purgatory as a genuine second chance. He outlines three major possible objections to his proposal[52]: (a) offering a second chance after death trivializes the choices made on Earth; (b) providing another opportunity for salvation theoretically means offering another chance for damnation as well; and (c) positing a second chance for repentance after death undermines the doctrine of the Last Judgment.

He rebuts the first objection by pointing out that traditionally, purgatory has been understood as the place for sinners who have repented but have not yet undergone complete purification, even if they repented on their deathbed. Unless one were to negate the validity of last-minute repentance – which would contradict the very purpose of purgatory – he argues that those who maintain a traditional understanding of purgatory 'seem to lack any principled reason for claiming that post-mortem conversion would trivialize this life'.[53]

In response to the second objection, he contends that the choice for God and the choice against Him are not mere opposites, and that 'the radical asymmetries between the two choices are such that there is good reason to think

[45] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 121.
[46] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 121.
[47] Walls argues and defends this concept primarily in Walls, *Hell*, pp. 88–103. To summarize his thought, though, he states in p. 89: 'I would say grace is distributed equally if grace of optimal measure is given to all persons and all are given full opportunity to make a decisive response to it, either positively or negatively. What is crucial here is the idea of a decisive response, but it is important to recognize that this is closely connected to the idea of an optimal measure of grace'.
[48] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 181.
[49] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 151.
[50] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 151.
[51] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 127.
[52] Walls, *Purgatory*, pp. 147–150.
[53] Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 147.

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the choice for God is not reversible in the same sense that the choice against him'.[54]

To address the third objection, he asserts that granting a second chance does not alter the ultimate fate of individuals who accept or reject the love of God: even if someone could escape damnation through posthumous repentance, this does not change the fact that 'those who reject Christ are lost and excluded from heaven, while those who accept him are admitted to eternal joy'.[55]

It cannot be overstated how significant Wall's pioneering contribution is; however, it is not without its criticisms, which I will address in the following sections.

4. Approaching eternity

In traditional Catholic teaching, the choice between good and evil is often referred to as the fundamental option, which is relevant when a person is engaged in the passage of time. Issuant accounts of the afterlife may elucidate the ultimate consequences of the fundamental option made during one's life. However, how can these accounts help us comprehend the definitive nature of the purgatorial experience and the complete orientation toward heaven that the Church has taught since Dante? Why, in principle, could a soul in purgatory not lose its salvation if purgatory exists within the realm of time? How can the concept of purgatory's temporality be connected to the notion of issuantism?

The two views on purgatory I reviewed earlier face some issues: whilst Ratzinger's one downplays the importance of the idea of time in which we construe purgatory Walls's, instead, completely bypasses the problems regarding time, focusing on purgatory as a second chance. This, however, raises questions regarding the morality of its denizens, and their directedness toward heaven. My proposal is then to develop a Thomistic line of thought already present in authors such as R. Ombres,[56] who emphasized the ontological and transformative dimension of purgatory. While Ombres focuses on the metaphysical basis for post-mortem purification, my account seeks to extend that insight by situating it within an issuantist framework and linking it to the intermediate state known as *aeveternity* in the Thomistic tradition.

4.1. The link between purgatory's morality and temporality

One of the central challenges in the doctrine of purgatory is reconciling its temporality with the definitive orientation of the soul toward heaven. To address this tension, I propose that, contrary to Jerry Walls's position, the mere fact that the choice against God is less reasonable than the choice for Him does not guarantee that souls will necessarily choose rightly. Human beings are often prone to irrational decisions – even when such choices clearly contradict their well-being or long-term interests. There is no obvious reason to assume that death, in itself, would automatically correct this

[54]Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 148. Just a few lines after, he states that: 'The blessed are settled in their choice and their final condition for reasons that have no parallel in the lost. The choice of God and the good is a settled choice that is irreversible because there is no intelligible reason to want to reverse it'.

[55]Walls, *Purgatory*, p. 150.

[56]Robert Ombres O.P., 'The Doctrine of Purgatory According to St Thomas Aquinas', *The Downside Review* 99 (1981), 279–287.

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tendency, unless one posits that the condition of being a disembodied soul somehow enhances rationality or makes one more naturally inclined toward God. If purgatory is conceived temporally – as it traditionally has been, at least from our human standpoint[57] – and if it offers a further opportunity for repentance, it becomes difficult to exclude, in principle, the possibility that a soul might reject that opportunity. This raises a deeper problem: if fundamental moral choices remain open after death, why should we assume that all of them will necessarily move in the direction of salvation? The structure of temporal purgatory, especially if tied to free will, seems to allow for the risk of damnation to persist even after death.

One might argue that even in a non-temporal or extra-temporal framework, some kind of moral choice remains possible. But this only shifts the question: if real moral decisions still occur after death, what guarantees that the soul cannot make a final, definitive choice against God? And if no such possibility exists – if the soul is no longer capable of damnation – then in what meaningful sense is repentance still free?

Walls does not explicitly state his opinion on the type of temporal dimension in which purgatory exists; instead, he focuses on the relationships between time, personal identity, and the abruptness of sanctification.[58] Yet without addressing the temporality of purgatory, his model risks a hidden universalism. If purgatory allows post-mortem repentance and all souls eventually choose God, then the line between purgatory and universal salvation becomes exceedingly thin.

Moreover, another problem that is brought up from the perception of purgatory as a second chance is that it would provide less justification for rejecting, in a non-arbitrary manner, the possibility of a third, fourth, or even infinite chances for repentance after death. However, this perspective would weaken our concept of hell to the point of rendering it ineffective or, at the very least, obsolete. Why should we care about hell or morality in general, if we could potentially have an infinite number of opportunities to repent? A conception of purgatory structured in this way would undermine the very purpose of issuantism, which seeks to reconcile the Christian concept of God with the doctrine of hell. If repentance remains always available, then hell becomes little more than a temporary delay in the soul's journey toward God, not the final fruit of human freedom.

This suggests, in my view, the need for a model of purgatory that is not temporally structured but could be seen more as a state of purification intrinsically directed toward beatitude. The soul does not remain in moral suspension, deciding its eternal destiny and following that decision merely because it is the most rational; rather, it is being conformed to the good it has already chosen. This account avoids the pitfalls of open-ended temporality while preserving the central intuition of purgatory as a place of sanctification.

While a detailed metaphysical exploration of time theories lies beyond the scope of this article, I will now sketch a theological alternative grounded in Thomistic metaphysics to resolve these tensions, namely the category of *aevum*, which offers a

[57]Thomas Aquinas points this out in the *Summa Theologiae*, Supp., App. I, a. 2., o. 1: 'The fire of Purgatory is eternal as to its substance, but temporal as to the effect of purification'. The eternal element is to be understood as a concretization of God's endless disposition, and the temporary one by our experience of it.

[58]See Walls, *Purgatory*, pp. 92–122.

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metaphysical framework to conceive purgatory outside of time without compromising its purifying direction.

4.2. Toward an aeveternal model of purgatory

According to Aquinas, heavenly beings such as angels and glorified saints are incorruptible. However, the souls in purgatory are not yet in heaven, even though they are oriented toward it, nor are they on earth any longer. They exist in a unique metaphysical state that necessitates a special condition, as traditional concepts of time and eternity are insufficient to accurately describe their afterlife status. A useful concept in this regard, drawn from Thomistic metaphysics, is *aevum* or aeveternity.

Aeveternity, in the works of Aquinas, is described as 'a mean between eternity and time'.[59] Since eternity is a measure that pertains solely to God, and time refers to the duration of mutable created beings,[60] aeveternity serves as a measure for the duration of beings that are mutable in certain respects but also partially immutable, such as angels.[61] Thus, aeveternity exists as an intermediary between time and eternity; it is distinct from time yet remains compatible with it, since it allows specific types of change. What implications does this have, however?

Souls in purgatory, though human and thus ontologically different from angels, can nonetheless be considered aeveternal in a derived sense. On the one hand, they are no longer subject to the temporal flux of earthly life; on the other, they are still mutable with respect to accidental imperfections – specifically, the residual effects of sin that must be purified. They are, however, immutable with respect to their final orientation: their fundamental direction has been fixed at the moment of death.[62]

We could then evaluate the condition of the repentant sinner in purgatory as one who is on an aeveternal fundamental direction (hereafter referred as AFD). They are not yet in the full presence of God, yet their ultimate trajectory is irreversibly ordered toward Him, drawing closer to eternity.[63] Following this understanding, at the moment of death an individual could be directed toward heaven or hell. Those who find

[59]Christopher M. Brown, *Eternal Life and Human Happiness in Heaven – Philosophical Problems, Thomistic Solutions* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), p. 115. Aquinas explores this concept in *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 10, a. 5.

[60]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 10, a. 4, o. 3: 'As eternity is the proper measure of permanent being, so time is the proper measure of movement and hence, according as any being recedes from permanence of being, and is subject to change, it recedes from eternity, and is subject to time. Therefore the being of things corruptible, because it is changeable, is not measured by eternity, but by time; for time measures not only things actually changed, but also things changeable'.

[61]Brown, *Eternal Life*, pp. 115–116.

[62]Ombres notes in this regard in 'The Doctrine of Purgatory', p. 283: 'At death each destiny is sealed, thus preserving the value of life in the body. In purgatory the basic orientation towards God, and the fundamental option for him, persist and are made to permeate the whole subject'.

[63]For Aquinas God's existence transcends not only time but aeveternity too, as Brown points out in *Eternal Life*, p. 118. Thus, the beatific vision, understood as the participation in the eternity of God, transcends those too; Brown explains this aspect in *Eternal Life*, p. 169: 'God is eternal by nature, and because he is identical with his activity, only God is measured by eternity *simpliciter*. But human persons nonetheless *participate* in God's eternal activity insofar as they are gifted the beatific vision, an activity that transcends all change, both actual and potential'.

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themselves oriented to heaven, though, could require a process of atoning to align and harmonize with the choir of the saints (Rev 4:8).[64]

This process involves change, but only in accidental – not fundamental – dimensions. Changes that involve the transient aspect of the penitent souls, namely, sins, are dealt with by drawing nearer to the fire that 'will test the quality of each one's work' (1Cor 3:13). Since sin is the consequence of distancing from God, a logical conclusion to moving closer to Him is that the remaining sins of the repentant are purged.[65]

A biblical metaphor may help to clarify this notion. After Jesus' conversation with the rich young man, he proclaims: 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God' (Mt 19:24). If, however, such a person were to repent sincerely – on his deathbed or shortly before – would a lifetime of idolatrous attachment be immediately and effortlessly undone? This would seem inconsistent with both human psychology and divine justice.

The concept of purgatory as aeveternal provides a compelling answer: the repentant soul has chosen to pass through the eye of the needle, but cannot yet do so. Purgatory is the process by which the soul is made fit to pass through – not by altering its destination, but by preparing it for arrival. In contrast, the damned have no such orientation: they do not *wish* to pass through the needle's eye. The difference between purgatory and hell is not the timing of repentance, but the direction fixed at death.

Thus, AFD offers a resolution to the apparent tension between temporality and eternity. It accounts for a state that is transitional yet definitive, purifying yet irreversible, and harmonizes the Christian understanding of free will, sanctification, and final judgment.

5. The necessity of purgatory within issuantism

As previously discussed, issuantism is a theological proposal that emphasizes the importance of free will. However, as Walls observes, this approach seems to exclude those who never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel and explicitly assent to or reject it. I would argue, as Walls does but for different reasons, that purgatory is indeed a supplement to basic issuantism that covers that role, and not only a convenient one but a necessary one.

According to Christian theology, God is not merely loving but is Love itself, which constitutes an ontological claim about His very nature. As I have articulated before, the reason why issuantist philosophers and theologians espouse that view is exactly to better conjugate this foundational affirmation with the doctrine of hell. Although initially counterintuitive, asserting that both heaven and hell stem from the same divine love allows issuantism to preserve a coherent link between God's nature and the reality of hell, thanks to a libertarian (or libertarian-compatible) concept of freedom.

Yet certain individuals – such as unborn children,[66] those with cognitive impairments, or those who never encountered the Gospel – could not, at least explicitly,

[64]Tangently, another advantage that AFD has is that aeveternity, since it is traditionally thought as compatible with time, gives meaning to the bimillennial traditional practice of praying for the dead.

[65]Ombres summarizes it eminently in 'The Doctrine of Purgatory', p. 281: 'To be purged is to draw closer to God'.

[66]A theologically focused parallel can be found in the document *Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*, in International Theological Commission, *Text and Documents – 1986-2007*, Vol. 2 (San

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express a moral orientation toward the Christian God during their earthly lives. The fate of well-intentioned pagans in the afterlife can be understood with an extended version of the doctrine of *votum baptismi*. But for the other categories of people that could not state their will in life, what otherworldly fate could be thought in an issuant eschatology?

Viewed through the lens of aeveternity, purgatory can serve as the necessary bridge between the transitional state of such souls and the issuantist structure of heaven and hell. Those people could express their assent, or refusal, instantaneously as the angels at the moment of their creation,[67] and then begin their purgatorial process in an outside-time reality. This approach would preserve the integrity of free will, the significance of earthly life, and the necessity of purification.

Without this supplement, an issuantist would not have sufficient reasonable grounds to state what is the fate of such unfortunate people and would have to retreat into mystery. Purgatory, however, allows us to comprehend the situation of the will-less and integrate them coherently in issuantism.

Rather than a 'second chance', purgatory for such individuals should be conceived as their first genuine opportunity to engage their will in the light of God's revelation – a moment analogous to that granted to angels yet situated outside the constraints of temporal life. In this way, God's justice and mercy converge without compromising the freedom that issuantism upholds.

6. Conclusion

In this essay, I began presenting a brief overview of issuantism and two issuant-compatible accounts of purgatory. Building on this foundation, I proposed that purgatory is not merely a possible addition to basic issuantist eschatology, but a necessary one.

However, I argued that for purgatory to function coherently within an issuantist framework, it must be construed as a state beyond time. A temporal understanding raises theological and philosophical issues – most notably, the problem of directional movement toward heaven within a time-bound context. While classical theology often frames such realities in terms of eternity, Aquinas introduced the intermediary concept of *aeveternity* to describe the existence of angels. I suggested that this notion may also fittingly apply to purging souls.

Interpreting the condition of souls in purgatory as an AFD offers a promising way to retain its purifying function and heavenly orientation without undermining the commitment to libertarian freedom of issuantism or slipping into a disguised form of universalism. Thus, it allows issuantism to maintain both its theological integrity and

Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), pp. 353–400. This document reconsiders traditional eschatological categories in light of divine mercy and the limits of human freedom. While addressing the history of this issue and a different set of cases, it shares a logic of hope and acknowledges the possibility of post-mortem transformation, even though it does not explicitly mention purgatory as an option.

[67]Brown, *Eternal Life*, p. 174: 'St. Thomas thinks that God created all of the angels in a state of grace, without the beatific vision. Some angels chose to remain in grace in that first moment of their existence and were immediately granted the beatific vision; those who chose not to remain in grace in that first moment were damned in the next'. Aquinas argues his views about this topic in *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, Q. 62, aa. 1–5, and Q. 63, a. 6.

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its internal coherence when accounting for the fate of those who require purification after death.

In this way, the doctrine of purgatory – reframed in light of aeveternity – emerges not as a relic of medieval soteriology, but as a crucial theological instrument for articulating a just and merciful divine economy.

Although further development could be required, the present argument suggests a possible pathway for integrating libertarian freedom, divine love, and post-mortem sanctification through the lens of aeveternity.

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