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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Knowing what you want–why disembodied repentance is impossible

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Abstract

It is a reasonable worry that God would not truly love us and want our salvation if He fixed a definite point after which He will no longer offer us the graces to repent of our sins. I propose that Thomas Aquinas succeeds in showing us that God would not be cruel or arbitrary in setting up a world where embodied agents end up after death in a state where they will inevitably fail to repent of their sins. Aquinas proposes that being disembodied is to be in a state where a person cannot be mistaken about what they want, given that they know themselves perfectly. If the disembodied state were like this, it would not be surprising that being in that state makes repentance impossible, since a soul would become fully integrated around whatever one desired, without any conflicting desires that could prompt repentance. Thus, humans would persist in whatever desires they had at the moment of death and disembodiment. I conclude by arguing that, while this scenario stands in need of fuller theodicy, Aquinas's scenario is helpful in defending a view that God is not cruel or arbitrary for creating a world in which post-mortem repentance is impossible.

Keywords: judgment; hell; Aquinas; Post-mortem repentance; angels

Christianity has taught that there will be no further possibilities for affecting our eternal destiny after that judgment occurs. *The Didache* presents it starkly: 'There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways' (Riddle 1886, c. 1). The way of death leads to eternal death for those who follow its way: 'then [at the end] shall appear the signs of the truth …[including] the resurrection of the dead; yet not of all, but as it is said: The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him' (Riddle 1886, c. 16). If we end our life in sin, we end up eternally dead and separated from God. If we end our life in faith and love, we end up eternally alive and united with God.

One might worry that God would not truly want our salvation if He fixed a definite point after which He will no longer offer us the graces to repent. And, if God would need to ensure by a special extraordinary act of divine intervention that some people *cannot* repent of their sins, God would seem to want them to persist in sin–which is problematic.[1] This worry is then that God has apparently no reason to agree with the teaching of the *Didache*, if He loves and desires that *all* be saved and find union with Him.

I will propose a possible scenario on which God is not cruel or arbitrary in allowing that angels and humans can become 'fixed' in their sinful desires. I will appeal to claims made

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by Thomas Aquinas to argue that (1) sin results from failures to care about something you ought to care about; (2) in the disembodied state we will fully identify with our desires, including sinful desires; (3) there will be no new information after death that can cause us to reconsider those desires with which we identify ourselves at death. These elements explain why disembodied souls will not repent. I will conclude by responding to concerns that facts about grace and predestination make God responsible for the damnation of those who do not repent in virtue either of setting up the world or not causally intervening to save all.

Prelude: how you want what you (shouldn't) want

Ty Monroe argues that Aquinas's affirmation that disembodied persons cannot repent of their sins runs contrary to 'his overarching commitments to the primacy of reason in moving the will, to the primacy and intrinsic desirability of the Good (i.e., God), and to the possibility of other forms of cognitive and volitional correction among the disembodied souls' (Monroe 2023, 709). As Monroe correctly notes, Aquinas's account of sin assumes that nobody can choose anything which does not appear good to the agent. This thesis about moral agency is central to his moral psychology (Aquinas 1922 [hereafter *ST*], I-II, q. 8, a. 1; Gorman 2022, 211–229). Aquinas holds that nobody could perform a sin which does not actually involve at least thinking what they do is good, in some way–'since there is naturally in any creature the desire for good, no one is led to commit a sin except by some appearance of good' (Aquinas 1954 [hereafter *De veritate*], q. 24, a. 10). This implies that every sin involves an error about what is truly good (Hoffmann 2021, 46ff.; *ST* I-II, q. 77, a. 2; Aquinas 1957 [hereafter *SCG*], IV.70.4).

This seems to put Aquinas in a dilemma, as making sin impossible, since a plausible construal of moral failure consists in 'doing what you know to be wrong.' The *Catechism of the Catholic Churc*h (1993) defines sin in this way, that a mortal sin involves knowing you ought not to do something, but nevertheless acting voluntarily to perform an act that is a gravely wrong kind of act (no. 1857). Sin has as a necessary condition that one act badly *despite knowing better*. But it looks impossible for anyone who knows better to fail to do the right thing, except by an involuntary mistake. To the contrary, Aquinas affirms that culpable ignorance is possible and appeals to such ignorance of what accounts for the possibility of sin: 'the omission, in so far as it is in some way voluntary; and accordingly, the neglect to know, or even lack of consideration is a sin' (*ST* I-II, q. 76, a. 2, ad 3; see further a. 1 & 2).

Yet one might also worry that there is an infinite regress in appeal to ignorance (E.g. Reitan 2007; Kronen and Reitan 2011, 148–177; Talbott 2014, 167–206; Hart 2019, 159–195; Reitan 2022). If ignorance is voluntarily chosen, then ignorance involves mistaken judgment that one ought to be ignorant. If that ignorance did not involve such a choice, it seems as if the agent acted for no reason at all in ignoring what they know or could know, and thus that they were not responsible for their actions. If one did choose to remain ignorant based on a misunderstanding of what was good, how could one both be rational and fail to advert to any further reasons to reconsider your actions? If they discover that their choices involved erroneous beliefs, how could a rational agent fail to revise those beliefs?

Aquinas's answer is to deny the dilemma by proposing that ignorance does not have to be *chosen* to be *voluntary*. An omission to act can be voluntary, and within your control, simply because it was in your control to become explicitly or occurrently aware of what you know in some other dispositional or (proximately) potential way. You do not explicitly have to consider reasons to omit to act, every time you voluntarily omit to act. Remaining in ignorance can be voluntary, even if the ignorance itself was not chosen. Thus, Aquinas explains the failures of sin in terms of our natural finitude: we cannot occurrently consider everything at once, including what we know, and this finitude is not in itself anything sinful;

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but this finitude is what intrinsically makes possible a person acting on some reasons they are explicitly considering while failing to consider what they know in another dispositional way. That is what it is to sin: to act contrary to what you know to be good. These omissions are sinful precisely because acting on some reasons rather than others involves *not caring* about what objectively does matter or is good; lack of care is what leads to one voluntarily remaining in ignorance about what one ought to do. The ultimate reason one fails to act on right reasons lies solely in the will, not the intellect (*ST* I, q. 63, a. 1, resp.).[2]

Knowing what you want

In what follows, I will abstract from historical concerns about Aquinas's development and present a plausible, possible, defensible scenario on which human beings after death are no longer able to repent of their sins. My interpretation builds on the way Aquinas points to the cognitive situation of the post-mortem disembodied or 'separated' human souls as resembling that of the angelic spirits.

Scarpelli Cory has pointed to self-knowledge as a mark of rationality for Aquinas (Scarpelli Cory 2013, 134–173). However, we could know ourselves (and our desires, beliefs, etc.) either indirectly or directly. In this life we know our own mental acts, and self, only indirectly through our attending to what comes through the senses (e.g. *ST* I, q. 87). But Aquinas notes that separated souls will need a distinct mode of knowledge once they are no longer have access to bodily sensation: 'When … [the soul] is separated from the body, it understands no longer by turning to phantasms, but by turning to simply intelligible objects; hence in that state it understands itself through itself' (*ST* I, q. 89, a. 1, resp.). Specifically, the separated soul knows *by means of its own essence*, as Aquinas believes angels do:

> when the soul really will be separated from the body …[it] will know itself directly by understanding its own essence, and not in an a posteriori fashion as it does in its present state … just as one separate substance knows another by immediately understanding its own essence … so also does the separated soul, by immediately understanding its own essence, know separate substances by reason of the infused species received from them, or from the highest cause, namely, God. (Aquinas 1949 [hereafter *De anima*], a. 17, resp.)

Aquinas appeals explicitly to this new cognitive state as accounting for the impossibility of post-mortem repentance, since this state persists in the state of the resurrected body:

> after this present life the separated soul will not understand by receiving anything from the senses, nor will it engage in the act of the sense appetitive powers. The separated soul is thus conformed to the angels in the manner of understanding and in the indivisibility of its appetite, which were seen to be the causes of the perfect obstinacy in the sinful angels. Hence there will be obstinacy in the separated soul for the same reason. In the resurrection, moreover, the body will follow the condition of the soul; and so the soul will not return to its present state … Consequently, even then the same reason for obstinacy will remain. (*De veritate*, q. 24, a. 11, resp.)

Aquinas, however, remains somewhat vague on the way in which this cognitive state makes it the case that separated souls remain obstinate in evil. My purpose in what follows is to speculatively fill in the gaps of Aquinas's account of why that cognitive state of the post-mortem human soul prevents repentance.

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Specifically, I propose two reasons damned souls are fixed in those volitions they had at death. First, in that state where a human soul is psychologically luminous or transparent to itself not only is it impossible for souls to be mistaken about their own beliefs and desires, but I will propose that they *perfectly identify with* all their desires. There would then be no intrinsic grounds for any person to reconsider what they want, as there could arise no new desire that could prompt them to revise their higher-order desires. Second, there will be no further information of the relevant sort in the afterlife which would be sufficient to lead to souls reconsidering their desires. But without such exterior intervention, separated souls would never repent for the same reasons that angels do not: they know what they want and see no reason to change what they want.

I abstract from historical concerns about the development of Aquinas's views and instead focus primarily on applying elements of what Tobias Hoffman presents as Aquinas's mature position regarding the impossibility of angelic repentance developed in the *Summa theologiae* and the *De malo* (Hoffmann 2021, 244–249; *pace* Feser 2023). Angels know what they want, whenever they form a desire. While it is true that angels do not always consider everything at once, for that is possible only for God, they always are aware of themselves and their mental states; their knowledge of themselves is always 'actual' (see Garrigou-Lagrange 1991, ch. 9; Vonier 2010, ch. 29; Feser 2023, 664–666). These spirits have mental states which they cannot be mistaken about, as their self-knowledge is essential to them:

> if in the order of intelligible beings there be any subsisting intelligible form, it will understand itself. And since an angel is immaterial, he is a subsisting form; and, consequently, he is actually intelligible. Hence it follows that he understands himself by his form, which is his substance (*ST* I, q. 56, a. 1, resp.).

In contemporary parlance, angels are 'luminous' to themselves (cf. Williamson 2002, esp. ch. 4). What I will show is that luminosity suffices, on Aquinas's moral psychology, to make it impossible for angels to change their decisions, once made. As Hoffmann notes, Aquinas holds that the 'angels' intellectual mode of cognition causes their cognitive fixity, and since the will is bound to follow the intellect's cognition, the angelic will is fixed as well' (Hoffmann 2021, 246).

Eleonore Stump builds her account of 'hardening of heart' on Harry Frankfurt's theory of 'freedom of will.' 'Freedom of will' is not, for Frankfurt, merely the condition for being a morally responsible agent. An agent with Frankfurtian freedom of will has nothing *internal* which prevents them from effectively willing what they want. The account draws a distinction between first- and higher-order desires, which consist respectively in wanting something or wanting to have certain first-order desires (Stump 1988, 396–397). Stump gives a case where the agent does not want to walk out of a room, despite an open door and lack of physical obstacles, because their superstitious fear prevents them from walking past a black cat on the way out. Such fear is an internal obstacle which the agent can recognize as preventing them from doing what they want–they could then have a second-order desire to eliminate their superstitious fear (Stump 1988, 398). On Stump's revised account, freedom of will involves having second-order volitions which are effective in producing the first-order desires that the agent wants, the agent lacks first-order volitions discordant with those second-order volitions, and they have their first-order desires in virtue of being produced (directly or indirectly) by their second-order volitions: 'for an agent to identify herself with some part of herself, such as certain of her first-order desires, is for her to form a second-order volition that accepts or assents to that part of herself' (Stump 1988, 409). Stump notes that we are identified with our second-order desires because of the way that

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these express our reasoning faculty; 'they stem from the reflection of an agent's intellect on her state of will' (Stump 1988, 411). Choosing an exercise programme, for example, leads to me cultivating those desires for health rather than to be lazy; my sticking to the programme builds a habit by which I progressively come to 'identify' myself with those desires for health. Yet, in this life, we do not fully identify with all our first-order desires in a higher-order desire, and we can have discordant higher-order desires, for much the same reason (Stump 1988, 400–401).[3]

If at death we come to have 'luminous' self-awareness and are psychologically transparent to ourselves in such a way that we could not be mistaken about our desires or beliefs, then there are two plausible consequences. First, having an incoherent set of beliefs or desires usually arises because we are not aware of them and intending them at the same time. By contrast, the state of psychological luminosity entails that one would have no conflicts among second-order desires, since one would be occurrently aware of them all at once in a way we are not so aware in this life. If it is true that we would not have any desires which we do not intend, it seems plausible that the state of luminosity also entails that our second-order desires would all be effective in bringing about first-order desires.

It is possible that our second-order desires at departure from this life might be mixed between desires for good and evil, so we have a 'divided will.' Whatever the selection procedure by which some desires 'win out,' if these desires inevitably tend to form a consistent set of second-order volitions under the influence of a psychologically transparent state in which you grasp and intend all your volitions together, my argument below will follow. (The temporal process of convergence of second-order desires after death would correspond to a purgatorial intermediate state.) Luminosity ensures that the will ends up *undivided*, and in that state it would not be possible for there to be further 'transformative experience' or other kinds of new information which could revise our beliefs/desires (for reasons I explain below). Strictly speaking, then, my argument only needs to assume that luminosity ensures, inevitably, that all discordant second-order desires are ultimately eliminated, not that a (temporarily) divided will cannot obtain.

While higher-order desires seem in our more immediate control, one might think it remains possible that there will be a psychological conflict among the damned agents' *first-order* desires–if all my second-order volitions produce first-order desires with which I identify, and there are no discordant second-order desires, it can still be possible that we have discordant first-order desires, due to some desires we do not identify with by a higher-order desire. We have an apparent case in Aquinas's position that nobody can cease entirely to have natural inclinations towards true goods and virtue, whether fallen angels or the damned (*ST* I-II, q. 85, a. 2). Stump similarly argues that Frankfurt is wrong in thinking anyone can be fully integrated around evil, since evil persons integrated around will always be dysfunctional. The true self of a person can consist only in integration around the good (Stump 2022, 38–39, 111–115). Could the damned be prompted to repent given an ongoing psychological conflict among their first- and second-order desires?

But we can accommodate Stump's intuition without admitting that the damned have discordant first-order desires. For instance, dysfunction in psychology of the damned might arise not from *internal* discordance among their desires, but from *reality* failing to fit their desires. 'Sin is contrary to nature by reason of the disorder whereby sin has the nature of evil, not by reason of what the one sinning desires' (*De malo*, q. 16, a. 5, ad 2). *Lack* of the *right* desires is what causes the damned pain and suffering, since what they want fails to be satisfactory. The damned never find this failure to be a sufficient reason to change their volitions, however, since they are fully integrated in desiring what they want. Aquinas seems to deny that the damned have discordant first-order desires for this reason. In this life, even

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the most hardened sinner continues to experience 'weak motions to good' (*De veritate*, q. 24, a. 11, resp.) whereas after death the person achieves an integration of themselves so that there are no discordant desires.

Nevertheless, we could concede discordant first-order desires of the damned towards the good, while denying these good desires are *effective* in causing reconsideration of the second-order volitions. Clearly, no such desires for the good–no 'weak movements' towards the good–are among the *second-order* desires of the damned. If the damned are integrated in their second-order volitions, there is no reason one could not remain forever fixed in a sinful disposition even amid psychic conflict:

> By adhering to something [a spiritual nature] is made one with it, as the intellect in some sense becomes the intelligible object by understanding it, and the will becomes the object of appetite by loving it. And so, although the inclination of the will is naturally directed to one determined object, the contrary can be made natural to it by love to such an extent that it does not return to its original disposition unless some cause brings this about. In this way sin is made as it were natural to the one who clings to sin. Hence nothing prevents free choice from remaining permanently in sin. (*De veritate*, q. 24, a. 10, ad 2)

A sinner has already formed their second-order volitions while intentionally ignoring their first-order natural inclinations to virtue. We sin by voluntarily *ignoring* those reasons accessible to us which would point us towards identifying ourselves with the good desires. Those reasons which the damned *take* as ultimate and decisive *for them*–the bad ones–would then continue to be the reasons upon which they have formed their second-order volitions.[4] The agent has already 'factored in the cost' of this conflict, so to speak, in forming their volitions, choosing which desires they want to integrate themselves around. Since Aquinas assumes that none of our reasons necessitate that we chose one way or another (that is, none of these reasons are decisive), if we encounter no *further exterior* reasons to reconsider our volitions then, as with any other sin, there is nothing intrinsic to our psychology that prevents sin from continuing indefinitely into the infinite future.

Hartman raises an objection that, if God intervenes in the lives of the living to remove sinful dispositions or first-order desires, God should intervene to remove the bad dispositions of post-mortem souls and miraculously re-engage their ability to form new volitions (Hartman 2023). Yet, on the explanation presented here, inability to repent does not result from an acquired habit by which the agent progressively and more closely identifies themselves with their first-order desires. Dispositions of that sort can be conceded to make it merely *harder* for someone to attend to reasons to love God, rather than make it strictly impossible (e.g. ST I-II, q. 85, a. 2, ad 3). But the fallen angels and humans are hardened or fixed in their state by way of *full* identification with their desires, not partial or progressively acquired second-order identification with first-order desires. As their higher-order desires fully identify with the sinful lower-order desires, to 'remove' the disembodied souls' or spirits' first-order desires and dispositions would be to remove *all* their second-order desires and vacate their identity. Due to their cognitive state, there would similarly be no 'room' in their psychology to infuse a further desire *alongside* their sinful desires and so generate an internal conflict between higher- and lower-order desires. To infuse into such agents the desire to love God would be to cause them to form strictly incoherent desires, as one cannot fully love both God and Mammon.

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Knowing what God wants

I have argued that facts about luminosity after death make it the case that the agent fully identifies with their desires either because they have no first-order desires that conflict with their second-order volitions, or because their second-order volitions all become effective and integrated, eliminating any potential for conflict among those second-order desires. On this picture, all that is fundamentally required for someone to persist in sin forever is simply that they make up their mind about what they want (where what they want is something incompatible with love of God) and never to encounter any reason sufficient to make them reconsider that decision, thereby prompting a potential new volition. It is this second condition to which I now turn.

Aquinas has a story regarding why the fallen angels never encounter such decisive reasons. In principle, angelic spirits are supposedly perfectly rationally agents, in possession of all natural facts. We know angels like Satan are nevertheless psychologically capable of sin, given facts about their moral failures in Christian revelation. The difficulty of accounting for angelic sin lies in explaining 'how a preeminently rational being could eternally will evil in a manner that is not due to misapprehension of some sort, and to explain how and why such misapprehension is immune to correction' (Monroe 2023, 714). Hoffmann explains that Aquinas theorizes that there is something about angelic knowledge being restricted to what is *naturally knowable* which suffices to make it rationally possible for even such rationally perfect agents to continue to lack faith or love of God–after sin, angels are 'cut off' from supernatural knowledge that would suffice to give them reasons to change their minds and repent of their sins (Hoffmann 2021, 247).

For Aquinas, salvation requires knowledge of facts not naturally accessible–we require revelation to know, for example, that God desires to raise us to the Beatific Vision (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 1; *SCG* I.5). This is true too of the angels. Angels do not know everything and, unless God reveals it to them either by a (created) manifestation of His will or by the Beatific Vision, they cannot know the future or God's contingent desires (e.g. *ST* I, q. 3 & 4). Whatever God did, He did not make angels intuitively aware of His contingent desires to unite with them in such a way as would make it necessary for them to love Him, as would happen if they experienced the Beatific Vision at their creation. Instead, God made the angels aware of His desire for them to know Him personally in some other way, in a way like the way evidence is presented to us of God's desire for our faith and love. This evidence does not intellectually compel our belief, as the evidence is not rationally decisive by itself and so does not constitute *scientia*-type knowledge of God's intentions (e.g. *De malo*, q. 16, a. 2, ad 2).[5] As we can ignore the miracles and words of God which invite us to love Him, the angels could ignore evidence of God's desires too. Consequently, an angel at the first moment of its existence was in a similar circumstance to a human being making an act of faith.

The angels are therefore psychologically capable of sin, despite being perfectly rational agents in possession of all natural facts, because God does not provide evidence of His *supernatural* desire for union with them that would be strictly rationally necessitating. As God has not chosen to give them the Beatific Vision prior to their own desire for it, angels sin in virtue of failing to care properly about God's desires for them, that is, failing to love and trust God. This failure to trust God would always for angels constitute a sin of unbelief, deriving from pride, because angels fail to be appropriately responsive to God out of a lack of concern for Him in favour of their love for some other known (spiritual) good for themselves (*ST* I, q. 63, a. 2, resp.).

If agents in this state fail to revise their false beliefs, or fail to discover that their beliefs are false, do they thereby cease to be rational agents? We can suppose that a perfectly subjectively rational agent would not rationally change their desires or beliefs if the evidence available to the agents is not sufficient to compel them to revise their beliefs. Yet the only evidence that would have been sufficient to bring an angel to revise their sinful desires,

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and form new ones, on pain of subjective irrationality, would require God to violate His desires for them to voluntarily desire the Beatific Vision in faith and instead provide them the Beatific Vision anyway. After they have formed those beliefs and desires that they have, and in the absence of the Beatific Vision, the fallen angels are subjectively rational in persisting in their desires thereafter. Given that they know what they want, and do not discover any new reasons that would change those desires, there would be no apparent reason for them to come to care about something else.

One might worry that–especially over eternity–angels should discover that their choices involve intellectual mistakes, even if they were voluntary mistakes, in virtue of the suffering that they undergo because of their sin. Nobody can remain both rational and voluntarily ignorant in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary (e.g. Talbott 2001, 431; Kronen and Reitan 2011, 155–160; Hronich 2023, 124–135). Nevertheless, Aquinas's point is that the angels who failed to trust God *ipso facto* never come to know *those* facts which would be sufficient to give them reason to change their mind. They cut themselves off from considering revealed facts appropriately in virtue of their desire to sin (even if those supernatural facts remain accessible to them). They have not become incapable of loving God, or unaware of His intentions for them–they simply do not care about them the right way. And then angels who fall cannot ever experience anything new that would constitute reasons for them to change their minds and repent of their sin, because the only thing that would be *decisive* would require knowing God's intentions in such a way that it could not be ignored or mistaken, and that would involve the Beatific Vision. That Vision *constitutes* salvation and is not a necessary condition for salvation to occur. Thus, as no other evidence short of the Vision is sufficient to compel that angel to trust God, the angel will simply persist in unbelief and sin (*ST* I, q. 63, a. 2 & 3; see Hoffmann 2021, 50–53, 210–213, 244–248).

This is not then to say that God *could not* provide the Beatific Vision to the angel, despite its unbelief. For Aquinas, it is a contingent fact that God set up the world so that a movement of the free will in faith needs to occur prior to achieving union; 'not on account of the insufficiency of the Divine power … but that the order in things be observed' (cf. *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 7, ad 1).[6] Yet, Anselm at one point hints that Satan was subjectively rational in his sin because he knew that it was metaphysically possible for God to give Satan the Beatific Vision despite his unbelief, that is, universal salvation is metaphysically possible, regardless of Satan's natural disposition to persist in sin forever once he chooses to sin. Satan is objectively wrong about God's intentions to bring about universal salvation–and culpably so, as God has made apparent to Satan that this will not happen–but Satan pridefully prefers his own will to that of God and therefore ignores evidence to the contrary. If God does not make it impossible for Satan to ignore the evidence, which would require giving Satan the Beatific Vision despite his unbelief, Satan can continue to embrace a false theory on which universal salvation will occur in the future (Anselm 2002, c. 4 and 23; further see; Rooney forthcoming).

If post-mortem humans were in an analogous state to that of the angels after death, having only a greater degree or extent of natural knowledge, they too would acquire no definitive reasons post-mortem to repent of their sins. Yet one might think that human beings are distinct from angels in an important way, since they do not always make decisions in a luminous state, let alone in possession of the comprehensive natural knowledge that angels have. Even if we concede that no further reasons would arise after death for humans to repent of their sins, in the new cognitive state they find themselves,[7] could coming to know their own desires and beliefs *at death* constitute a new insight that would prompt them to revise those volitions?

I think there are two responses. First, biting the bullet is not overly problematic: a moment of special psychological insight, a privileged opportunity for repentance,

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occurring *at the moment* of bodily death.[8] If this were to occur, it would be more comprehensible why agents who thereafter persist in sin now remain fixed in this state. However, psychological luminosity does not obviously involve insight into whether our second-order volitions were *really* good or bad, rational or irrational. Luminosity is only psychological transparency. We come to know ourselves, not the goods. It is not then *ad hoc* to hold that luminous self-awareness would prompt the integration of our second-order desires, and that our second-order desires become volitions effective in producing first-order desires, without entailing or requiring any further knowledge regarding *the goods we desire*. Thus, we would know and effectively will what we want but acquire no special insight into whether what we want is good and could thus persist in (luminously) wanting what is bad.

However, my account has already provided a principled reason that we would never after death come to new retrospective insight into whether our (morally bad) desires were bad for us. States like 'self-deception' arise from our desires, prompting us to ignore information accessible to us, so that persistence in culpable ignorance of the facts results from desire alone. Our *desires* prevent us from investigating and discovering new reasons to revise those desires, even if we were to acquire new epistemic access to facts in light of which our desires could be retrospectively judged to rest upon bad reasons. As the fallen angels could at any time form a relationship with God and acquire supernatural knowledge, but nevertheless never do so merely because they lack the desire for it, post-mortem humans would never be moved to *consider reasons to revise their desires* after becoming volitionally integrated, and they will never undergo the only experience–the Beatific Vision–that could potentially be decisive in bringing them to revise those desires.

What God does

One might nevertheless think that God would be *withholding* a necessary means for persons to come into union with Him by permitting anyone to become disembodied. God knows that entering such a state makes it thereafter impossible for that person to find union with God. So, God would seemingly intend that some people–after an arbitrary point–cease to have opportunities to find union with God. Since He knows that after death they will lack the psychological capacity to repent, God seems to deny such persons the opportunity for repentance. Monroe thus poses a dilemma whether

> it belong[s] to the nature of God's wisdom to withhold grace because of ontological status of the human person, post-mortem–a status chosen by God, as creator–or is it simply *conveniens* that the explanation of the human's ontological structure befits a prior–and ultimately inscrutable–decision on God's part to limit the possibility of redemption to the pre-mortem state? (Monroe 2023, 721)

Monroe thinks that God's decision (1) not to give grace He could otherwise give to miraculously bring about conversion of the damned and (2) setting up the world to make it impossible for them to repent after death is equivalent to God intentionally *withholding* grace from certain persons He foreknows end up in these circumstances.

The theistic tradition of Aquinas, however, distinguishes between what God intends and what God permits. God not working a miracle (and preventing anyone from persisting in their sin forever) did not make it necessary that anyone ends up in this state of damnation, for the same reason that God's failing to work a miracle (and prevent sin from occurring at all) did not make it necessary that anyone sin. All that makes hell possible is that God allows people to sin and that they can persist in that sin forever. The damned persist in sin, but their sinful desires could have been otherwise, as those desires were in the control of the agent to have formed them differently. God setting up the world to make damnation possible does not entail that God wants anyone to be damned. Indeed, Aquinas defends the

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stronger claim that what God has done is not even a *sufficient* condition for anyone sinning or being damned.

Aquinas claims that each sin was avoidable, given God's universal offer of sufficient grace, since (following Catholic teaching) he holds that each person is providentially supplied with all that is necessary for them to achieve union with God.[9] Further, the only reason that some do not take advantage of God's offer to experience union is that they do not *want* to do so. Aquinas therefore explicitly underlines the fact that people *freely* persist in their sins, as in 'choice' models of hell (Kvanvig 2011, c. 1), and clearly states that God's will is *not* sufficient condition for damnation: 'the failure constituting sin, by which a person is made deserving of punishment here and now or in the future, is not itself willed by God with either an antecedent or a consequent will; it is merely permitted by Him' (*De veritate*, q. 23, a. 2, resp.). The damned have sufficient means for union with God even if they fail to achieve union with Him–it is *their fault* that they end up in hell, not God's. Thus, 'God does not on His own part wish to damn anyone, but only in accordance with what depends upon us' (*De veritate*, q. 23, a. 8, ad 2).

Some might believe that Aquinas's metaphysics would preclude in principle the claim that God's will is only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition of sin's occurrence and persistence. Taking Aquinas to hold a view parallel to (at least the popular perception of) the position of John Calvin on God's sovereignty, no created agent is ultimately in control of their decision to sin–only God is. God's decisions *are* a sufficient condition for all that occurs, including sin, since nobody can do other than what God decides. Roberto De La Noval confesses confusion at the way in which Aquinas's account of God's causing our free actions does not make God the sufficient cause of our sins. As Aquinas seems to hold that all our free actions occur because God moves us to perform them (i.e. causes them), then God must want sin to occur, since He causes us to sin–and, even if there is some sense in which God does not want us to sin, we could not have done otherwise relative to what God wanted us to do when He wanted us to sin (De La Noval forthcoming).

Such a view requires controversially affirming that Aquinas holds to theological determinism or compatibilism. Thomists inclined to this view emphasize that God makes it 'inevitable' that sins occur when they do, by setting up the universe a certain way, and did this for good reasons (Davies 2006, 189–191; O'Neill 2019, 280). Further, they allege God does not cause the sin itself, as it is metaphysically impossible to *cause* a privation (like sin) to exist (e.g. Long 2016, esp. 73–75).[10] Even though I cannot adequately pursue a response to worries about predestination, reprobation, and limited election in this article, these claims appear to conflict with many of Aquinas's views, which is what makes such views controversial among Thomists.

The primary problem with this view of causal sovereignty is that it makes God responsible for all sin. If human sins occur 'inevitably,' given what God has done, so that sinners could not have done otherwise relative to God's decisions for them, these views seem to remove the control over those acts from human agents and make God the sole sufficient cause of whatever acts we perform, sins included (O'Neill 2019, 276–290, 208–210; see further Rooney 2021; O'Neill 2023; Rooney 2023). But this very clearly conflicts with Aquinas's own views–and classical theism more generally. Aquinas affirms repeatedly and explicitly that God causes sin *nullo modo*, and, specifically, that God is not responsible for the decisions of creatures to sin by making it impossible for them to avoid sin (*ST* I, q. 49, a. 2; I-II, q. 79, a. 1; *De malo*, q. 3, a. 1, resp. and a. 2).[11] Aquinas's explanation of sin is that moral failure results from *failing to act*, not from *acting*. Thus, God can cause all our acting while not causing our failures to act. These claims about sin, which Aquinas endorses, imply that what God does causally is only a necessary background condition for the occurrence of sin, insofar as God brings about free creatures capable of sin and does not make them impeccable by grace (see Jensen 2023, 115–146). Nevertheless, if God's causal involvement in our actions and

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will neither *necessitates* nor *suffices* for bringing about our sins, we can affirm that created agents alone are responsible for–that is, sufficient causes of–our moral failures, including our damnation (Hoffmann 2021, esp. 184–186).

For my purposes, nothing more needs to be said beyond this claim that God does not will that sin either occur or persist, since I defend only a possible scenario on which post-mortem repentance is impossible and God is not cruel. On this scenario, God could have set up the world differently, or could miraculously or providentially intervene in various ways to bring about the salvation of each person, but His not doing this in no way necessitates or suffices for anyone being damned. If that were true, we have a scenario on which God is not cruel or arbitrary in allowing post-mortem repentance to be impossible–God simply has chosen to let people want what they want, even if they forever want something other than union with Him.

Conclusion: theodicy

A possible rejoinder is that a perfectly loving God cannot allow anyone to *persist forever* in wanting what is bad for them. Responding to this worry, however, requires a full-scale defence or theodicy of God's permission of moral evil, including whether God has good reasons for permitting damnation. A merit of the explanation given here is that God's set of reasons for permitting sin and damnation are the same. That is, all God had to do for moral evil to be possible among the angels was to create persons while desiring that those persons come to union with God through faith, so that our choice to seek union with God is our own and not necessitated by what God has done in making us aware of His desires for us (see *ST* III, q. 6, a. 1; *De veritate*, q. 14, a 10, resp.). Persisting in sin forever, and so being damned, is made intrinsically possible by the way in which God desires that union should occur via faith (see *ST* I-II, q. 4, a. 4; *SCG* IV.152; Jenkins 1998; Stump 2003, 363–364). If we assume (as Aquinas does) that God *is* in no way culpable or responsible for anyone sinning, and God *has* good reasons for allowing sin, then we do not need to know anything further to conclude that God setting up the world so that people come to know what they want in disembodied states is neither arbitrary nor cruel.

A full-scale defence or theodicy would complete Aquinas's story about God's causality of free acts and the way in which God permits sin. The account given here does not provide that theodicy, but it nevertheless points in the direction of union through faith as an essential part of Aquinas's story of sin–and, by extension, of damnation. God's permission of both seems to rest on the reasons behind His desire for union with creatures by means of faith, to achieve union as something *we* desire freely, rather than setting up the world so that union occurs through various kinds of necessity, whether rational or otherwise. If God wants us to have what we want, and to achieve union with Him through the desires of our own hearts, then we can affirm that His desires are not thwarted by our sin or even damnation, even though God need not want either sin or damnation. He need not accept either as the 'price' of some others achieving union. Rather, He could still achieve different kinds of union with us apart from faith. Thus, even if God will not give a creature the Beatific Vision independent of their desires for union with Him and will not cause them to have those desires by providing them with knowledge that would make it rationally impossible for them to persist forever in unbelief, God can continually provide the means for us to achieve union with Him while we persist in rejecting them and achieve a *partial* union thereby. Indeed, God's continued presence to the damned, and His achieving some union with them, might be what causes their torment, as Maximus the Confessor and John Damascene seem to have held (Bradshaw 2021).[12]

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Notes

1. Hoffmann proposes that Peter Olivi, Peter Auriol, Ockham, and Duns Scotus give explanations of this kind; see Hoffmann (2021, esp. 258).
2. 'Such a sin does not presuppose ignorance, but merely absence of consideration of the things which ought to be considered.'
3. One can have discordant second-order *desires*, not volitions, as volitions are effective desires.
4. Cf. Feser (2023, 660–663); Feser is partly right that the ends *appear* ultimate, but that is simply because they are chosen as ultimate by the agent and the agent does not change what they want after death, as I explain.
5. 'because they cannot comprehend God because of his infinity, nothing prevents their intellect having failed to comprehend adequately the ordination of God's governance. And this resulted in the sin in their will'; also, 'the devil's sin regarded something supernatural, not something belonging to the order of nature. Therefore, the devil's first sin was that, to attain the supernatural happiness consisting of the complete vision of God, he did not elevate himself to God so as to desire with holy angels his ultimate perfection through God's grace' (a. 3, resp.).
6. This claim is not semi-Pelagian, as Aquinas holds that any such movement of free will occurs only on account of God's grace.
7. In *De veritate*, q. 19, a. 1 & *De anima*, a. XVIII, Aquinas seems to think that disembodied human souls will begin to engage in the mode of cognition connaturally enjoyed by angels–God will 'beam' innate species into human souls and make intuition their new natural mode of cognition. But this is not strictly necessary, as far as I can see, to the central theoretical posit of the account, which is that our own mental states are transparent to us while disembodied. In any event, even if all the facts were present, that will not include the supernatural facts. Post-mortem epistemic access to natural knowledge would not be sufficient to end the evil desires one had at death. Such angelic comprehensive knowledge of all that is naturally knowable might conceivably specify or inform our post-mortem desires in some way, but it is important to recall that such knowledge is compatible with having evil desires and failing to believe or love God. Satan has such knowledge and sins anyway.
8. Cardinal Cajetan held a similar theory.
9. For example, Aquinas's *In I Tim.* II, lec. 1, and *In Heb.* XII, lec. 3. See also White (2016, 109–110); *Catechism*, nos. 74, 618, 851.
10. Notice that, if this general metaphysical fact were successful in exempting God from responsibility for sin, it would also imply that the creature was not a cause of their sin either.
11. For example, 'the deformity of sin in no way falls within the compass of the divine will' (a. 2, ad 2).
12. The moral state of the damned 'leads not only to a diminishment into non-being but also to alienation from all that is good' such that the damned find themselves in a position where they experience both 'the unmediated presence of God to those whose characters are such as to find his presence repugnant' and of being deprived of those 'lesser goods that the soul, due to its own voluntary formation, eternally desires'.

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