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# Purgatory

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**Abstract**

I say briefly what the Catholic Church now teaches about Purgatory. I offer an account of time which allows the purgatorial process to be genuinely temporal, but not precisely quantifiable or temporally relatable to processes and events in our space-time. I examine ancient, Enlightenment and modern notions of punishment, connect them with a theory of the relation of right and wrong to law and with the conception of a faculty of will, and argue that purgatorial process need not be considered punitive. I suggest it might consist in coming to share God's divine knowledge, and consider how prayers for the dead might help them.

**Keywords**

time, punishment, law, will, moral character

Catholic teaching about Purgatory is not quite the same as Orthodox teaching about the fate of people who die in sin but will get to Heaven eventually, which was a controversial issue in Western Europe at the time of the Reformation. Perhaps it is still an obstacle to reunion. What precisely does the Catholic Church teach now?

An old 'penny' catechism published in Newcastle in 1790 deals (p. 22) with Purgatory as follows:

> Q: What do you mean by purgatory?
>
> A: A place where souls are punished for a time for lesser sins, or for not having done full penance for the great sins they repented of.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* published in 1999 has three paragraphs (1030-32) on 'The Final Purification, or Purgatory'. It says: 'The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent'. The tradition of the Church, by reference to certain texts of Scripture [sc. 1 Corinthians 3:15; 1 Peter 1:7] speaks of a cleansing fire, and quotes Gregory the Great (Migne,

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*Latin Fathers* 77, 396): 'For certain lesser faults, we must believe that before the Final Judgement, there is a purifying fire'. The principal text of scripture to which appeal is made is 1 Corinthians 3: 13-15. Paul there speaks of building on the foundations he has laid and says:

> The work of each person will become clear; for the day (sc. of Christ's coming?) will show that it is revealed in fire; and what each person's work is like, the fire will prove by testing. If the building work that someone has done remains, that person will receive a reward. If someone's work is burned up, that person will be penalised, but will still be saved, in such a way, however, as through fire.

The *Initiation Theologique* published in Paris (Editions du Cerf) in 1957-61 says:

> If the faith of the church is fixed on the existence of a purgatory, it is far from explicit about the nature of this fire, on its duration and on the particular way in which it works.[1]

A just comment, we may think. Certainly the words of 1 Corinthians 3: 13-15 are less than perfectly clear, though Paul does seem to have in mind the testing of metals and other things by fire. The custom remains, however, among Catholics of praying that people who have died should be released from suffering after death, and this suffering is conceived as punishment for sin and temporal, that is, lasting for a stretch of time. I shall first consider what kind of temporality can be assigned to this suffering, then how far it can be conceived as punishment, then in what it can be supposed to consist, and finally how we can be helpful.

We might be tempted to think that the temporality is just the same as ours. Suppose my uncle dies at noon on Monday, that his death, in other words, is simultaneous with the passing of the sun through the noon position relative to Greenwich. Suppose he never committed any great sins, and he has done nearly sufficient penance for his lesser sins. His particular judgement, we believe, starts at once. The law's delays should be less in the afterlife than here and now, so it might be over by one p.m., and his purification might start immediately. The funeral is on Thursday. If his purification is complete at one p.m. on Friday, it will have taken exactly five days. We, of course, do not know that, but God does.

An objection to thinking in this way is that Einstein argued, and his argument has been generally accepted, that if two events are not part of the same event but at a distance from one another, then simultaneity for them is relative to a frame of reference. There seems to be no frame of reference common to the purgatorial process and bodies like the Sun

[1] Vol. 4 p. 865. *Si la foi de l' Église est maintenant fixée en ce qui concerne l'existence d'un purgatoire, elle est peu explicite sur la nature de ce feu, sur sa durée et sur son efficacité propre*.

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and the Greenwich Observatory. God is not a frame of reference, and perhaps all events in our world are simultaneous in a way for God. To put it at its simplest, we cannot relate events in Purgatory to events in our world unless the process of purgation takes place in a space related to our space. People may have difficulty in accepting this because they conceive time as Newton did: 'Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature, flows equably without relation to anything external'.[2] It is like a celestial clock the hands of which always move at the same speed, that is, they always take the same time to move through the same angle. Two events are simultaneous with one another if they are both simultaneous with the passage of the hands of the celestial clock through the same position. This conception is circular and regressive - we must postulate a super-celestial clock to ensure it moves 'equably'.

If dying is not simply ceasing to exist and we continue, in some sense of 'continue', to exist after death, in what way is this continuation temporal? If I die at noon, do I exist at 4 p.m.? If so, where am I? Or is my existence non-spatial? Such questions seem hardly to arise for Dante; he seems, at least, to place Purgatory on the side of the globe opposite Italy, and Heaven in the solar system beyond the Moon. In a recent article, 'Time in Heaven',[3] Scott Steinberchner argues that Heaven may have space and time, but space and time different from ours: a space, perhaps, with different dimensions from our three and in which entropy does not hold, and a time, perhaps, in which backward time travel is possible (pp. 277–9). He does not mention Purgatory, but if he is right about Heaven, Purgatory too may be spatio-temporal, with a space and time different from ours.

Steinberchner's speculation would be welcome in a work of fiction, such as those of C.S. Lewis, and we can enjoy a story in which time travel is possible and in which there are more spatial dimensions than three. A philosopher, however, needs a view of what time and space are. Steinberchner does not raise the question what space is. He distinguishes theories of time in which the passage of time is real from those in which it is an illusion, and says that his argument does not depend on taking holding a theory of either kind, though he himself favours those of the realist kind; and he appears to work with a view derived from Aristotle's *Physics* Book 4. Aristotle there defines time as 'the measure [*arithmos*] of change in respect of before and after', and adds that 'measure', *arithmos*, can be used in two ways, for something measured and for the what it is measured in; time, he says, is what is measured, not that in which it is measured (219b1-8). A journey from

[2] *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, Scholium to the Definitions.
[3] *New Blackfriars* 100 1087 (2019) pp. 264-83.

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London to Edinburgh, for instance, is, in respect of before and after, so many hours or minutes of travel.

Aristotle's definition of time as it stands is circular. The journey from London to Edinburgh by train can be measured in time units, but it may also be measured in units of distance; it is four hundred miles of travel. A change in temperature may be measured in hours: we can speak of a two hour rise in temperature; but it can also be measured in degrees, and we may speak of a ten degree rise in temperature. In any ordered series there are before and after. In the journey from London to Edinburgh, Peterborough is before York. In the rise in temperature from freezing, five degrees is before eight. Aristotle's definition will capture time only if he says that time is the measure of change in respect of before and after *in time*.

Aristotle's definition can be amended with the aid of his distinction between possibility and actuality. Any change can be considered in two ways, as a possibility, a possible change for things, or as an actuality, as the actual going on of a change. A change measured in units of distance, such as miles, or in units of size, such as acres or pints, is a possible change; temporal units, such as hours and years, are units in which we measure the going on a change. We can say, therefore, that time, or what is measured in time units, is the actual aspect, the going on of change.[4]

Aristotle could not say that himself, because he had used his possibility-actuality distinction to define change itself in Physics Book 3 as 'the actuality [*entelekheia*] for that which is possible, [or which exists in possibility], as such' (201a9-11). This definition, however, fails because of what we today call the 'process-product ambiguity'. Aristotle was aware of the existence of this ambiguity. Taking the building of a house as an example, he says 'either the process of house-building is the actualisation [*energeia*, a word he uses interchangeably with *entelekheia*] of that which can be built, or the house is; but when the house exists, that which can be built no longer exists'. But his attempt to define change was an attempt to explain the difference between a process and a product, and this cannot be done by giving examples of the two. (Elsewhere[5] I advocate approaching the task by considering our use of certain syntactical items, verbs of being and becoming, and simple and continuous tense-forms.)

If time is the going on of change, there can be no time without change and it seems impossible to form a coherent conception of time travel. Even if we do not accept this account of time, time travel still seems to be ruled out by the law of contradiction, since it would involve the travellers both not having been present and having been present at a

[4] I defend this view in 'Time', *Philosophy* 56 (1981) (149-60).

[5] *Metaphysics and Grammar*, London: Bloomsbury 2014, 117-9; 'Speaking and Signifying', *Philosophy* 94 (2019) 3-25.

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past time. But if a real change can take place not in our space, not in spatial relations to anything in our spatio-temporal world, then its taking place would be a stretch of time not temporally related to stretches of our time; whether it would differ from stretches of our time in any other way is less clear.

The definition of time as a kind of measure or number [*arithmos*] fits changes which, considered as possibilities, can be measured or quantified with some precision. Changes of place are like that: they can be measured in units of distance, such as miles and kilometres. So are changes in size, which can be measured in units of length, area or volume, changes of shape, which can be measured in degrees of arc, changes of temperature which can be measures in degrees centigrade. All these changes not only take time, they not only go on for stretches of time, but the stretches of time can themselves be quantified with some precision. If I fly from London to New York, the time of my travel, the time for which I am moving, starts with my leaving London and ends with my reaching New York, and these events can be correlated with movements of clock-hands or other instruments for quantifying time stretches. (My starting and stopping may be called 'changes' from being at rest to being in motion and the reverse, but these switches[6] between being and not being in a state of change are not themselves changes and do not take time: if we count them as changes we must admit further changes from not switching to switching ad infinitum.) The correlation with measuring devices, of course, depends upon precise identification of the terminal events and their being spatially related to the measuring devices.

The changes in the spatio-temporal world most important to us, however, are not like this. Aristotle in a famous passage says:

> Nature proceeds from inanimate things to animals little by little in such a way that, because of the continuity, we cannot perceive the boundary or to which those in between belong. (*Historia Animalium* 8, 588b4-6)

Aristotle was speaking of nature as it is at present; his continuity stretches from things completely inanimate like pebbles to living creatures ranging from plants that turn towards the sun to intelligent, self-aware human beings. We now, however, see an historical continuity from a time when there were no living organisms at all to today with its philosophers. There is no boundary between the time when there was no sentience and time when there was some, nor between the time when there were no intelligent beings on the earth and the time when they are almost too many. And the same continuity exists in individuals. When gametes meet, the foetus into which they combine is equipped to develop sense-organs and a human brain, but it is not at first sentient.

[6] As Colin Strang calls them in 'Plato and the Instant', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 48* (1974). 62-79).

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Sentience goes with control of limbs. There is no boundary between being and not being able to control some of one's limbs. A new-born child has a human brain but needs to acquire the ability to speak and abilities to discern temporal relations and purposes. These changes from not being sentient to being sentient and from not having intelligent capacities to having them are not like changes from being at rest to being in motion; they are real changes which take time, but we cannot say precisely how much time, in a particular individual, they take, nor when an individual first hears something or believes or wants something or has a practical capacity we count as mental. The terminal events cannot be identified precisely enough to be correlated with measuring devices. Our concepts of life generally and of mind specifically are, in comparison with those of mathematics, what philosophers call 'fuzzy'.

The word 'purification' invites us to conceive the purification of a soul on the model of processes like the washing a dirty garment or the fumigation of a dirty room. The change from being dirty to being clean is brought about through movements in space and the time of these movements is quantifiable, though it is doubtful whether even dirtiness as ordinarily conceived is exactly quantifiable; 'dirty' and 'clean' in ordinary speech are relative terms like 'hot' and 'cold'. If purgatorial purification effects a change from being dirty to being clean the dirtiness and cleanliness are psychological and the time taken cannot be expected to have sharp limits. If we nevertheless think it must be brought about partly by movements in space, not only must we suppose that there is space in Purgatory, but like Dante we must conceive people in Purgatory as having bodies.

Few theologians today would say that Purgatory is spatio-temporal in the way Dante describes it, and a theologian can think of it as a real change and temporal in a way without thinking of it as brought about by any kind of causal action. It is similar to the changes we undergo when our characters form and change. These depend on physical action and refraining from physical action over a period, but they are not brought about by any particular acting or refraining. They spread over years and involve countless thoughts and feelings in the course of an intelligent being's complex life. To form an idea of the purgatorial process the theologian should look to elements in that life.

The sense-organs of a new-born child are affected by people and things around it, but we may hesitate to say it is aware of those things. What precisely is involved in awareness is a question for the philosopher, but the change from just having an image of a person formed on your retina to being aware of the person cannot be attributed to any particular causal action. Similarly the change in an infant from making movements which in fact benefit it and making the same movements in order to obtain the benefit. Adults acquire feelings of friendship, love and dislike towards people they meet. The change from mere

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acquaintance to these dispositions takes time but cannot be timed precisely or explained causally. And it is the same with the change from having no opinion about a controversial matter, whether a question of fact like climate change or a question of right like abortion, and having a settled opinion – or the change from having a settled opinion and losing it. These changes are real and temporal, but we do not think of them as physical in the way change from being dirty to being clean is physical; at least when not philosophising, we explain them not physically, by processes in the brain, but rationally: we think people have reasons (not necessarily good reasons) for adopting opinions, attitudes, and practical principles, and these reasons are objects of thought.

To summarise what I have said so far, insofar as post-mortem life involves real change, it must be temporal in a way; but the time of the change cannot be temporally related to our time, and need not be quantifiable in the way we quantify times of physical change. There is no answer to the question how long a particular person's purgation takes. Let me now pass from the question of temporality to the other questions I raised at the start: how far must suffering in purgatory be conceived as punishment, and in what can it be conceived to consist?

What, exactly, is punishment? The concept of punishment is connected with those of suffering, guilt, culpability, justice, wrong-doing and, for Christian theologians, sin. Adjustments to one of these concepts is apt to affect others, and they have, in fact, changed over time. In the seventeenth century Locke analysed the notion of right and wrong as follows:

> Good and Evil, as hath been shewn, BII Ch XX s. 2 and Ch XXI s. 42, are nothing but Pleasure and Pain … Morally Good and Evil, then, is only the Conformity or Disagreement of our voluntary Actions to some Law, whereby Good or Evil is drawn on us, from the Will and Power of the Law-maker; which Good and Evil, Pleasure or Pain, attending our observance or breach of the Law, by the Decree of the Law-maker, is what we call *Reward* and *Punishment* … For since it would be utterly in vain, to suppose a rule set to the free Actions of Man, without annexing to it some Enforcement of Good and Evil, to determine his Will, we must, wherever we suppose a Law, suppose also some Reward or Punishment annexed to that law. It would be in vain for one intelligent being, to set a Rule to the Actions of another, if he had it not in his Power, to reward the compliance with, and punish deviation from his Rule, by some Good and Evil, that is not the natural product and consequence of the Action itself. (*Essay* 2. 28. 5–6)

Punishment, then, is pain imposed upon someone for lawbreaking, pain that is not the natural consequence of the law-contravening action itself. That seems a fair analysis of the notion of punishment current today. I think it is also believed by many people today that justice requires the punishment of law-breakers and, more generally of those who do wrong – for not everyone accepts that wrong-doing depends on the

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existence of an enforceable punitive law. When one person is injured by a second person's action or omission, justice, it is felt, requires that the second person should suffer some evil beyond the natural consequence of the action or omission. The Greeks had a word, *antilupêsis*, which means inflicting pain in return for pain. This is today considered just punishment, and punishment understood as *antilupêsis* is felt to lie at the heart of justice.

That was not always so. In Saxon times justice was thought to require not *antilupêsis* but restitution or compensation, and this was also prescribed instead of *antilupêsis* in much Roman law. Aristotle in his analysis of justice [*dikaiosunê*] notes that some people equate it with 'being done by as you did' [*to antipeponthos*] but considers this a mistake (*Nicomachean Ethics* 5,1032b21-5). He divides justice into distributive and corrective justice, and does not make punishment part of either. The Greeks has a word, *kolasis*, which we translate 'punishment', but Aristotle distinguishes this from vengeance [*timôria*], saying that vengeance is for the benefit of the person who carries it out, whereas punishment is for the benefit of the person who undergoes it (*Rhetoric* 1, 1369b12-14). He calls it a form of healing or medical treatment (*Rhetoric* 1, 1374b33; *Nicomachean Ethics* 2, 1104b16-17). The noun, *kolasis*, and the verb, *kolazein*, were also used for checking the growth of trees, especially almonds, and that idea appears in the well known passage John 15: 1–2: 'I am the true vine, and my father is the grower. Every branch in me not bearing fruit he cuts out, and every branch that does bear fruit he cuts back, in order that it may bear more fruit.' The word I translate 'cuts back' is not *kolazei* but *kathairei*, the word normally used for purification.

This way of thinking is not totally alien to our age. When General David Ramsbotham (later Lord Ramsbotham) was appointed Inspector of English Prisons, he said that as a simple soldier he liked to concentrate on a single aim, and in his opinion the aim of prison was rehabilitation. But this was not well received by the Home Secretary, since the electorate thought the aim of prison is making wrong-doers suffer.

Locke's notion of punishment is bound up with a view of the relation of right and wrong to law. What makes action right, he says, is compliance with a law made by someone with power to reward compliance, and what makes action wrong is deviation from a law made by someone with power to punish deviation from it. A law itself cannot be right or wrong, though it may be good if it causes pleasure to the legislator or to those subject to it, and bad if it causes pain. In classical times it was supposed that action could be right or wrong independently of being prescribed or forbidden, and that laws were good or bad depending on whether what they prescribed or forbade was right or wrong independently of them – *ius quod iustum.* Punishment does not play an important role in this earlier way of thinking. The seventeenth century view expressed by Locke goes back to the revival of the study of law

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in Bologna in the twelfth century. Logic and mathematics revived at the same time and while theorems in mathematics could be proved deductively, that actions were right or wrong could not. At the same time literacy spread and people became acquainted through the Bible with a culture in which law played a central part. The reverence of the Jews for their laws was not irrational. Society depends on people's conforming to laws and customs, and language and rationality depend upon society. And whereas Greek states enlisted the help of human legislators, the Jews believed that their laws were made by God. Seventeenth century thinkers, reading the Old Testament, saw God, in Locke's words, 'setting rules to the free actions of men', such as the rule that he alone should be worshipped, 'annexing enforcements to them of good and evil', and severely punishing disobedience. Nevertheless it is doubtful whether punishment should play a big part in Christian thought today. If it is in general bad to cause pain or harm to people, why is it not bad to cause pain or harm to those who have hurt or injured others? If Christ forbade returning evil for evil, it is hard to suppose God would do that.

We are disposed to think punishment is right because the notion of punishment is also bound up with those of a faculty of will and of guilt or sin. If the distinction between right and wrong is dependent on law, a gap will open between what we know to be right or wrong and what we think best. When we knowingly do something the law forbids, we know it is wrong, but we want to do it, and we exercise our faculty of will on the side of our desire. Our intellectual faculties enable us to tell whether a course of action is right or wrong and whether a course would be pleasant or unpleasant in some way, desirable or undesirable; but we need a further faculty to turn a possible course into action. This is the will. The will does not operate independently of us or completely at random; if it did, we should not be culpable for doing what we know to be wrong. It acts in its own wilful way, like a disobedient teenager, or like a servant we fail to control. Hume says[7]: 'Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions'. His aim, perhaps, was to provoke the staid and stupid; had he wished to please them he might have said 'The will is seldom, but ought always to be, the slave of our knowledge of law'.

The notion of a faculty of will, an agent, so to speak, within the human agent, seems to have appeared at roughly the same time as the idea that right and wrong are dependent on law. Early thinkers simply identified intentional acting with acting as we think best, all things considered. They held that when we do something we know to be forbidden by law, even if we think the law a good one, that what it forbids is wrong on the whole, we think the forbidden act is not wrong on this occasion, but merely forbidden by law. A gap opens for us between

[7] *A Treatise of Human Nature* 2.3.3; ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge p. 415.

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what is right or wrong and what the law prescribes or forbids. In such a case, what we do may not, in fact, be wrong. But if is, our wrong-doing may be due to an intellectual failure, perhaps to emotion that distorts our view of the situation, blocking out relevant circumstances or preventing us from a correct estimate of probable consequences. We often miscalculate the consequences for other people of what we do or omit to do, and we often form wrong opinions about what other people think or want or need. If we take this view we may think wrong-doing calls more for instruction than for punishment.

Philosophical developments that led to change in thinking about punishment have led also to change in thinking about sin. The nouns in New Testament Greek which we translate 'sin', *hamartia* and *hamartêma*, comes from a verb originally used for missing a target, and the noun was used for any kind of mistake or way of going wrong. That is probably how it should be understood in John 1:29: 'See! The lamb of God who does away with the *hamartia* of the cosmos'. This broader meaning was shared by the Latin *peccare*. 'Sin', however, and its equivalent in other languages now carries the restricted meaning formulated by The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as its primary meaning: 'A transgression of the divine law and an offence against God'.

So much on how far Purgatory should be considered as a place of punishment for sin. How, apart from making people suffer, should the purgatorial process be conceived. In Stephen Langton's hymn that was formerly used in the liturgy at Pentecost the Holy Spirit is asked to water in us what is dry, bend what is rigid, warm what is frigid, and straighten what is crooked. These are processes brought about here by action upon bodies in space; could something analogous be done to a soul in Purgatory?

It is helpful to consider what is required for any kind of life after death. That depends on whether human souls are naturally immortal. The view that they are is well entrenched in theology, but it seems to go most easily with a dualistic, Platonic view of the soul-body relationship, and there are, and have been since the Middle Ages, theologians who prefer an Aristotelian, hylomorphic view. I have argued elsewhere[8] that we can accept that the soul is what is constituted by the body and that death is therefore naturally the end, but that we can nonetheless continue in existence by the grace or gift of God though sharing in the divine life of Jesus Christ. There are scriptural texts suggesting Christ taught that is the only way in which we can live on after death. Some people have thought we can continue to exist through reincarnation, and Plato seems to have toyed with the idea of an existence of bodiless contemplation of forms of thought, but it is difficult, I think, to form a satisfactory conception of life after death unless we assume

[8] 'Two Theories of Soul', *New Blackfriars* 90 (2009) 424-40.

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that it involves some sharing in the life of the creator, and I shall proceed on that assumption.

What, then, might be involved in sharing in Christ's divine life? Divine life, so far as we can conceive it, involves some kind of knowledge of creation and desire that the course of nature should go on for the benefit of living creatures. Sharing in Christ's divine life, the divine life of the Second Person of the Trinity, should involve sharing in that knowledge and desire within the limits possible for a human being. That suggests two main ways in which a human being who dies may need to change.

First, our self-knowledge is limited. We do not know the full consequences of everything we have done; in particular we do not know precisely what harm or good our actions have done to other living creatures. Indeed, much of that good and harm will be done after our death. If we are to share in God's life we should acquire some knowledge of these things; we should become able to see ourselves from God's perspective. Besides not knowing the full consequences of our actions we may have imperfect knowledge of our reasons for them or the motives that moved us to them. The curing of these deficiencies will almost inevitably involve distress. It may be very mortifying to recognise the extent of our self-deception; and when we know clearly what harm we have done we must experience what Aristotle calls 'distress at apparent evil which is destructive or painful undergone by someone who does not deserve it, which we could anticipate being suffered by ourselves or our friends, and that when it seems near' (*Rhetoric* 2, 1385b13-16).

The purgatorial process must involve deepening of self-knowledge in these respects. It must also involve deepening of our knowledge of other people we have known. We must share God's knowledge of what these people have thought of us and said of us. This too, since our improved self-knowledge will enable us to judge how far these opinions are just, may be extremely mortifying.

Perhaps more important, among the people we have met in life there will be many of whom we have no reason to think ill, but with whom we should not like to share a desert island, let alone a room, let alone a bed. If these people continue to exist after death they will be sharing God's life in a more intimate way than any of these, and consequently ours, too. Perhaps that thought is appalling. How could we possibly have that intimate relationship with everyone else who continues to exist after death – perhaps with billions of other people? It is asking too much of a finite human being. Christ, however, at the Last Supper, said he was sharing not just the narrow space of a room with his disciples, but his own flesh and blood; and he does seem to say very explicitly in John 6:53-8 that unless we share his flesh and blood we shall not have life after death. The Church teaches us that he underwent a cruel death to save human beings and did that out of disinterested concern for them. If salvation depended on their incorporating themselves in him,

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he must have seen in them not just something to pity, but something to love. His divine nature must have enabled him to see this in every individual, including individuals born after his life on earth. Theologians may debate about the relationship between Christ's divine knowledge and his human knowledge during his lifetime, but if we are to share in his divine life, we must become able to see something to love at least in the individuals we have known when alive. Life after death, therefore, depends on expansion of our knowledge of these as well as of ourselves. That may be agreeable; we may be pleased to discover unguessed excellences in people; but we shall probably also have to recognise we have made false or facile judgements. In either case the expansion is necessary if we are to be united in the one body of Christ.

This enlargement of our knowledge is exactly why we need to get rid of *hamartia* if the ancient understanding of wrong-doing is correct, and acting wrongly arises from intellectual failure: ignoring relevant circumstances, miscalculation of probable consequences, mistaken opinions about what other people think or want or need. Inattention to relevant circumstances and mistakes about consequences and about other people may be innocent. But even innocent mistakes, once made, unless they are recognised and corrected, are easily repeated. When we acquire bodily skills like walking and throwing, movements become easier when repeated, and we make them automatically, even when they not as efficient for our purpose as others might be. The same goes for intelligent practical life generally. Our responses to recurrent situations become habitual, and the habits we form by repeated action or inaction constitute goodness and badness of character. Aristotle analysed virtues and vices as dispositions to feel emotion (*Nicomachaean Ethics* 2 1105b20-1106a12), but whereas Enlightenment thinkers took emotions to be mindless 'passions' like bodily sensations, Aristotle insisted that the emotions of rational adults involve true or false thoughts.

Besides forming habits of misreading people and situations we may absorb practical principles and what are called 'values' from the society in which we live, which are more or less imperfect or mistaken. These principles and values need to be dislodged rather, to revert to the words of 1 Corinthians 3, as impurities in metal, which impair the efficiency of tools made from it, are dislodged by fire. But what dislodges them is not the sort of pain we experience when we are burnt, which makes clear thought impossible, but seeing people and situations through the eyes of God.

Post mortem changes in knowledge may vary in difficulty as well as in extent, even if no quantifiable time can be attached to them. Catholics believe that their prayers can help the dead; and since there is no temporal relation between changes in purgatory and action in our spatio-temporal world, if prayers can help the dead at all, it does not matter how long ago they died. It is not irrational for me to pray for

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someone who died long before I was born, and who, therefore never heard of me when alive. But how can such prayers be helpful?

There is support both in scripture and in tradition for praying for the dead, and so long as we have reason to believe that our prayers can indeed help the dead, it is not irrational to pray even if we do not know exactly *how* they can be helpful. The same, after all, might be said of any prayers; we can pray to God for any intention without knowing how doing so can help towards the fulfilment of that intention; we do not need a theology of grace. To explain how prayers can help the dead, the Catholic Church has traditionally relied on its doctrine of indulgences. As set out in Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, this doctrine relies heavily on the notion of punishment. An indulgence is a remission of temporal punishment for sin that the Church has authority to grant out of a store of goods accumulated by virtuous members of it in their lives on earth. Because they are all members of the Church and the mystical body of Christ, the credit for their outstandingly good deeds forms a kind of pool from which the Church can draw to meet the debt of temporal suffering people incur from (I quote *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, s. 1472), 'an unhealthy attachment to creatures'. I spoke earlier about the notion of punishment for sin. Perhaps I can add a couple of considerations that are less dependent on it.

That I am praying for my dead uncle out of gratitude to him or loving concern is an item of knowledge that might be included in the purgatorial process. It might cheer him and weigh against his mortification at other discoveries. More important, it might make it easier for him to assimilate less palatable or more strange and elusive knowledge. Acquiring ordinary human knowledge is not a passive process. Teachers cannot pour knowledge into their pupils as they can pour water into a pot; the pupils must make a response, and not just want to receive it but try to grasp it. And their efforts may come more easily if they are not alone, if they have friends who are also learning. The same may be true of coming to share in the divine knowledge which ensures clear discernment of what is best: prayer for a dead person by someone who is a member of the Church, and to that extent of Christ's body, may assist the dead person's efforts.

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