

"Self-Annihilation or Damnation?
A Disputable Question in Christian Eschatology"¹
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By the fourth century, if not earlier, a picture of what happens to human beings at the death of the body had been largely agreed by Christians. It was a picture intimately linked with a particular anthropology, as all such inevitably are: depicting what happens when we die is always at least an extrapolation from what we take ourselves to be while alive; it is also among the more important tools we have for focussing and elaborating our self-understanding, and for meditating discursively and visually upon what we take ourselves to be. Disputes in eschatology are always also disputes in anthropology.

What interests me in this essay is two facts about the Christian tradition. The first is that it had, by the fourth century, developed conceptual resources that could, if pressed only a little, easily yield the view that among the things we are capable of doing to ourselves is annihilation, taking ourselves quite out of existence, leaving nothing behind. These resources were of central importance to the tradition, too. They weren't marginalia or the speculation of some insignificant figures. Some thinkers, notably Augustine, get quite close to explicitly affirming that we can take ourselves out of existence, and, given his anthropology, it would certainly have made good sense for him to say just this. But in fact he always draws back: although he canvasses the possibility explicitly on occasion, and more often implies it by saying things that seem quite naturally to lead to it, he never affirms it. When he does discuss the possibility it is always negatively; and when it is implied, or seems to be, the implication is never assented to. And in all this Augustine is entirely typical of Christian thinkers in late antiquity who discuss the post-mortem questions. This is the second interesting fact that I'll explore in this essay: that a conclusion strongly suggested by some among the conceptual resources of a particular tradition is nevertheless resisted by the principal systematizers and transmitters of that tradition. When this happens, there is an internal tension. That's what I want to explore in the case of the question of self-annihilation: I want to understand why there is a tension of the sort I've briefly sketched, and to suggest how it might be eased.

All this has something important to do with Hell. Hell is, according to standard-issue Christian eschatology, a label for one of the only two post-mortem destinies finally open to human beings, the other being Heaven. If self-annihilation is or might be a possibility for Christian eschatological thought, then either Hell's definition will have to be expanded to include it, or it will have to be added as a third eternal destiny alongside Heaven and Hell. In either case, if self-annihilation is permitted as a possibly Christian view, then it will have also to be said that Christians assert

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conditional immortality for human beings rather than inevitable immortality. For if annihilation is possible for some human beings (or for all), this just means that immortality is not inevitable for all. Conditional immortality is among the contraries of inevitable immortality, and while it is certainly true that the vast majority of Christians have asserted inevitable immortality, there have always been some Christian voices raised in support of conditional immortality, which is the view I intend further to explore in this essay.²

In order to clarify the question I begin with a conceptual analysis of self-annihilation.

Self-annihilation (1): a conceptual analysis

If something is annihilated it is, as the word's etymology suggests, brought ad nihilum, to nothing. Whatever it was is now no more. Whatever was denoted by its personal proper name (if it had one) is now absent. A comprehensive list of the contents of the cosmos, post-annihilation, will no longer yield whatever it is that has been annihilated; while that same list, pre-annihilation, would have yielded it. An annihilated thing will always leave traces or vestiges of itself: its having been brought to nothing does not mean there are no remains. It means only that it, whatever it was, is not among those remains. They do not conjointly constitute it. A thing's traces are not the thing, and when a once-present thing can now be found only in its traces, it has been annihilated.

This way of glossing annihilation depends upon a distinction between what something is and what its traces are. A similar though not quite identical distinction is the traditional one between a thing's essence and its accidents. I shall not defend these distinctions further here, and it is certainly possible reasonably to reject their coherence or usefulness (though I suspect that only philosophers do). I simply observe that the question about annihilation depends upon some such distinction. I can meaningfully ask whether you can annihilate yourself only if there is a distinction between you and what is not you, and this distinction in turn depends upon a distinction between you and your traces, for if there is no such distinction then all attempts to individuate one thing from another will be a matter of convention only.³ And since I shall assume that I can meaningfully ask whether a particular thing has been annihilated or not, I shall also assume that there is such a distinction. Such an assumption does not carry in its train the thought that it is always or often easy to tell the difference between a thing and its traces; but it does carry with it the assumption that there is such a difference, and that in some cases we can know what it is.

² The earliest Christian thinker to have defended a version of conditional immortality was probably Arnobius of Sicca at the end of the third century.

³ The topics broached in this paragraph circle around the difficulties of individuation and composition: Where does one thing end and another begin? How (if at all) can we tell the difference between one thing and another? Are all such tellings tellings only? What is the proper account to give of the relation 'being a proper part'? These are among the most difficult conceptual questions, and while they can be resolved (I think) for animate beings, I do not see that they can be resolved for inanimate creatures. On this see, inter alia, Peter van Inwagen, Material Beings (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1990).

In the case of a human being, annihilation requires the removal of everything except its traces. Decisions about the boundary between a particular human being and its traces will depend upon decisions about the kind of thing a human being is, and no such decision is uncontroversial. If you're a physicalist where human beings are concerned, then you're likely to think that bringing a particular animate object to nothing is the same as bringing a particular human being to nothing. On this view, I can annihilate you just by killing you. If, by contrast, you think that every human being is, definitionally, a noncorporeal entity—a soul, a spirit, a mind, a collocation of causes, a congeries of emotions—then noting that a particular body has been brought to nothing will be irrelevant to the question of whether a particular human being has been brought to nothing. If you think that whatever is essential to or definitive of a particular human being is something that cannot, as a matter of principle, be brought to nothing, then you will also think that no matter what the appearances, no human being is ever annihilated. Christians, as we shall see, have generally found that last view attractive, though they usually hold neither of the first two.

Self-annihilation, to complete the conceptual analysis, is annihilation brought about by an action (or actions) of the thing annihilated. More precisely, you annihilate yourself when your own actions suffice to bring yourself to nothing, to take yourself out of existence. It seems fairly clear that inanimate objects cannot annihilate themselves in this way. Rocks and oceans do and can do nothing that will suffice to bring themselves to nothing. If a rock is pulverized as a result of rolling down a mountainside in an avalanche, or an ocean evaporated by exposure to unusual heat, this is best accounted for by saying that they were acted upon by something other than themselves, not that they acted. Animate beings, however, may be able to so act. A bird might kill itself by flying at speed into a window's clear glass, and if you think that birds are just bodies, it will thereby have annihilated itself. Birds, however, are unlikely to intend to do what I've just described (if indeed it's proper to say that they intend to do anything); they annihilate themselves, if they do, as a side-effect or by-product of intending something else. We human beings can certainly do likewise: we can kill ourselves without intending to do so, though whether this amounts to self-annihilation depends upon whether human beings are just bodies. But we are unlike birds (and perhaps also unlike all other embodied animate beings) in that we can also kill ourselves by intending to do so, just as we can inflict many other kinds of damage upon ourselves by intending to do so. But self-annihilation does not require that it be intended in order that it occur; all that's required is that an agent act in such a way as to bring it about.

So we now have our question before us, clear and vivid: can you, human being that you are, so damage yourself that you bring yourself to nothing? Is there anything you can do to rid the cosmos of yourself definitively and finally, leaving only your traces to ornament it? Can you annihilate yourself? There are elements in Augustine's thought that strongly suggest this possibility.

Self-annihilation (2): an Augustinian version

The standard Augustinian picture of what happens to us when we die goes like this: Earthly life ends with physiological death, the death of the body. This is the first death,⁴ and it is defined as the separation of the soul from the body and the body's consequent loss of life. Immediately following this is an interim period which will last for each separated soul from the moment of the first death to the moment of the general resurrection and the last judgment, which will be inaugurated by Jesus Christ's second coming. This means that for some the interim will be very long, and for others very short. This interim will be disembodied: souls exist in it without bodies of any sort. Augustine finds this puzzling because it is axiomatic for him that a human being is by definition an embodied soul, which is to say neither just a soul nor just a body.⁵ Any existence that a disembodied soul has, therefore, must be shadowy, a half-life. He calls the place of this interim existence an abditum receptaculum,⁶ "a secret refuge," and does not speculate much about its nature. In this secret refuge separated souls await the resurrection of their bodies, and they do so with either pleasure and tranquility or restless suffering, according to the nature of their lives prior to the first death. The good will find the interim pleasurable, an anticipation of Heaven; the bad will find it distressing, an anticipation of Hell; and there may be some who, although they suffer in the interim, will nonetheless finally enter Heaven. Their interim suffering, unlike that of those destined for Hell, is purificatory,⁷ and what Augustine says about this was ingredient to the much later development of a doctrine of Purgatory. Separated souls in the interim, therefore, are not properly speaking in either Heaven or Hell. Interim existence, because it is bodiless, can be no more than a shadowy anticipation of Heavenly or Hellish existence. The imprecise, tentative, and speculative nature of Augustine's discussions of this part of post-mortem existence reflects what he thinks about the nature and feel of disembodied existence for human beings. It is questionable for him that your separated soul in the interim is really you; it is certainly not fully you.

The interim state comes to an end with the general resurrection and the last judgment, at which every separated soul is reunited with its body, judged by God to be worthy of Heaven or Hell, and sent immediately thereto. At that moment begins a changeless and endless mode of embodied existence—an eternal mode of existence in the full and proper sense of that term. And Augustine thinks that every separated soul,

⁴ There were debates about whether everyone has suffered or will suffer this death. Most, Augustine included, excepted Enoch and Elijah from the first death upon the basis of Scriptural evidence (Genesis 5:21-24; 2 Kings 2:9-12): they, it was thought, were taken directly into Heaven without dying. Some also excepted Mary. And some also thought that those who had not undergone the first death at the time of Jesus's second coming and the almost-simultaneous general resurrection would not need to die. On this latter point, see De civitate dei, 20.20.

⁵ "... homo non est corpus solum vel anima sola sed qui et anima constat et corpore [referring to Genesis 2:6]. Hoc quidem verum est [Augustine is discussing the view of an opponent with whom he agrees on this point about what a homo is] quod non totus homo sed pars melior hominis anima est, nec totus homo corpus sed inferior hominis pars est. Sed cum est utrumque coniunctum simul, habet hominis nomen ..." De civitate dei, 13.24. Augustine goes on to explain that we can refer to either the body or the soul as (a) man, but that when we do so it is good to recall that we are speaking synecdochically.

⁶ Enchiridion, 29.109.

⁷ De civitate dei, 21.26; Enchiridion, 18.69.

without exception, enters upon one or another of these destinies. The anima, the soul, was created immortal,⁸ and these two embodied destinies are, he thinks, the only final possibilities for each individual soul. He places enormous emphasis, therefore, upon the resurrection of the body. The body with which your separated soul will be reunited at the general resurrection will be your body, in some sense identical with the body that died in the first death; but it will also be significantly unlike that body, and the exact nature of the likenesses and unlikenesses proved matter for endless speculation. Will the resurrected body necessarily be of human shape? Will it be gendered? Will it be like the earthly body at twenty, or forty, or sixty? What will happen to the hair- and nail-clippings of which the earthly body was divested so often? What about human beings who died as small children or in the womb—what will their resurrected bodies be like?⁹

Augustine likes to say of those resurrected for Hell that they have undergone the second death, a death in which the soul is definitively separated from God. This is the last moment in the life of the damned, for thereafter, strictly speaking, there are no more moments: there is only a changeless, eternal expanse of embodied suffering. Two polemical concerns arise for Augustine out of this picture of Hellish existence. The first concerns the idea of bodies that can endure eternal suffering: does this idea make sense? Is it not the case that bodies are by definition temporal, transient, and therefore incapable of enduring eternal suffering? Augustine has answers to this difficulty that need not detain us.¹⁰ The other polemical question is pressed by those Christians who are uneasy about the idea of eternal suffering without chance of change. Why does this come about? How can it be avoided? Does it make sense? Augustine has answers for these problems, too, even if not entirely satisfying ones.¹¹ I shall not pursue those discussions here.

This sketch of Augustine's views (and they are not only his: they are largely agreed by all late-antique Christians) about what happens to us when we die yields the following picture for the Hell-bound: they sin here below; their first death separates them from this body into a shadowy interim period of anticipatory suffering; at the general resurrection they are reunited with their bodies and consigned to Hell, which is their second death. There they suffer for eternity. The same picture, mutatis mutandis, applies to the Heaven-bound. And there is no one else: all human beings are either Hell- or Heaven-bound. None will be annihilated, from which it follows that none can annihilate themselves.

But Augustine undercuts this view in much of what he writes about the soul and its capacity for self-diminution by means of sin. He thinks that each human being is in part constituted by a soul, which is to say a noncorporeal, rational, free, and internally complex entity, self-related on the model of God's triune self-relation. The rational soul, because it is God's image, participates more fully in God than does any creature, and to say that each human being is an embodied rational soul is therefore to attribute

⁸ "...tamen non sic mori potuerunt [Augustine is writing of the rebel angels, but he goes on to apply the same point to homines] ut omni modo desisterent vivere atque sentire quoniam immortales creati sunt, atque ita in secundam mortem post ultimum praecipitabuntur iudicium ut nec illic vita careant, quando quidem etiam sensu, cum in doloribus futuri sunt, non carebunt." De civitate dei, 13.24.

⁹ Augustine catalogs and discusses these disagreements in De civitate dei, 22.12-21.

¹⁰ This problem is analyzed at length in the first half of Book 21 of De civitate dei.

¹¹ They are discussed in the second half of Book 21 of De civitate dei.

to each of us a high dignity. To say that the soul is free is at least to say that it is the bearer of certain powers or capacities the particular exercise of which is not fully determined by agents or circumstances other than itself. Among these powers are, most notably: the capacity to know, which carries with it the capacity to argue, to judge, and to evaluate; the capacity to identify, to desire, and actively to seek particular goods, and to understand itself as doing so; and the capacity to form habits or dispositions.

Augustine also thinks that the soul's capacities can be exercised well or badly. We can identify as a good what is not a good; we can desire what we should not; what seems to us knowledge can be error; and so on. The freedom of the rational soul is, therefore, in part a freedom to diminish and damage the human being of which it is a proper part, and it is essential to Christian orthodoxy to claim that every human being is, since the fall, damaged, in part by its inheritance and in part by its own free actions.¹² Damage is diminishment, the partial obscuring of the divine image in which the human being essentially consists. On this understanding, self-annihilation would occur when the divine image was erased. Anything that then remained would be a trace, not the human being itself. If the soul's defining properties listed so briefly in the preceding paragraph are severally necessary and jointly sufficient for its existence, then the irretrievable loss of any one of them will mean its annihilation. Were a particular soul to become so damaged that it lost, irretrievably, freedom, the capacity to know, and the capacity to form dispositions and act upon them, it would, simply, cease, and with it would cease the human being of which it is a part. No one of these capacities could be damaged to the point of irretrievable loss without similar damage to the others, in much the same way that no one of the body's vital systems (respiratory, sanguinary, neuronal) can be damaged to the point of irretrievable loss without concomitant damage to the others.

It is essential to Christian orthodoxy to claim that we can damage ourselves. This is what the doctrine of sin is about. When we sin, we avert our gaze from God and from the radiant weight of God's glory that is evident in creation. We turn ourselves away, that is, from what is toward what is not, from the good that is God to the privatio boni that is God's absence, also known as evil. In doing so, we become less than we were, which is to say that we participate less fully in God than we otherwise would have. We are diminished by our sin. This way of describing sin's nature and effects is both Scriptural and philosophical. It assumes and hinges upon a particular, broadly Platonist, understanding of what it is for particulars (me, you, tables, trees) to exist, an understanding that construes the existence of each particular in terms of the participation in God—the plenum, the ipsum esse subsistens (to use Thomist language)—appropriate to its nature. A rational soul's sin, on this view, damages it by removing it from such participation and taking it toward the nihil, that absence from which it came and which is the only possible direction in which such removal can tend. The assertion of a self-willed autonomy, for instance, paradigmatic as it is of all sin, decreases the soul that asserts it exactly because it is successful in its goal, which

¹² All Christians would except Jesus' human soul from this claim about damage, and some would also except Mary's. But for the rest, damage is unavoidable.

is to avert the soul from God and to make it self-dependent, which is to say dependent upon something less than God, its creator and sustainer.¹³

The depiction of sin's damage by way of images of ontological loss, of decrease in being, is everywhere in the fathers of the Church. Augustine depicts it often, and lyrically:

[The rational soul] does many things because of perverse desire, as though it had forgotten itself. It sees in an interior way certain beautiful things which are in that more eminent nature which is God. And although it should keep still so that it might enjoy them, it wants instead to make them subject to itself, and not to be like him [God] because of him, but to be what he [God] is all by itself. And so it turns away from him [God] and slips and slides into what is less and less, which it imagines to be more and more. Neither itself nor anything else suffices for it as it moves away from that one [God] who alone suffices. In its destitution and difficulty, it becomes excessively intent upon its own actions, and upon the disquieting delights it gets from them.¹⁴

This is diminution toward non-existence, the dying fall of a *diminuendo* that will (or may) end in silence. It involves error: the sinner takes to be more what is in fact less; but it also and more importantly involves will or intention: the sinner wants to

¹³ The doctrine of participation is a difficult one, and a matter of controversy among Christians both as to whether it belongs to Christian thinking at all, and, among those who think it does, as to which of its several versions is to be preferred. In my view, some version of it is unavoidable if a fully Christian distinction between creator and creature is to be maintained, but this essay is no place to argue that point. Essential reading on the idea of participation includes: Craig A. Boyd, "Participation Metaphysics in Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 79 (2005), 431-445; W. Norris Clarke, S.J., "The Meaning of Participation in St. Thomas," in idem, *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 89-101; Oliver Davies, *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), chs. 1-2 (for a critique); Cornelio Fabro, *La nozione metafisica di partecipazione secondo San Tommaso*, 2nd ed. (Turin: Società editrice internazionale, 1950); Louis Geiger, *La participation dans le philosophie de S. Thomas Aquin*, *Bibliothèque Thomiste*, no. 23 (Paris, 1942); Fran O'Rourke, "Aquinas and Platonism," in Fergus Kerr, OP., ed., *Contemplating Aquinas: On the Varieties of Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 247-279; Kenneth L. Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982); Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: Das Wagnis der Seinsfrage* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1961); John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and Participation," in idem, ed., *Studies in Medieval Philosophy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 117-158.

¹⁴ "Multa enim per cupiditatem pravam, tanquam sui sit oblita, sic agit. Videt enim quaedam intrinsecus pulchra, in praestantiore natura quae Deus est: et cum stare debeat ut eis fruatur, volens ea sibi tribuere, et non ex illo similis illius, sed ex se ipsa esse quod ille est, avertitur ab eo moveturque et labitur in minus et minus quod putat amplius at amplius; quia nec ipsa sibi, nec ei quidquam sufficit recedenti ab illo qui solus sufficit: ideoque per egestatem ac difficultatem fit nimis intenta in actiones suas et inquietas delectationes quas per eas colligit." From *De trinitate*, 10.5.7. Compare *De trinitate*, 12.9.14. See also *De immortalitate animae*, 7.12, in which Augustine explicitly says that the soul can tend toward nonexistence (*id ipsum esse minus habet, quod est deficere*), and that the extent to which it does so is the extent to which it approaches the *nihil*. For an equally lyrical display of evil as nothing, see Jean-Luc Marion's discussion of the Devil as "l'idiote absolu," the one who has become "l'absolu négatif de la personne," in *Prolégomènes à la charité* (2ème ed.; Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1991), 36, 38. The essay from which these quotations were taken was written in 1979.

move away from God and toward himself, and does what is necessary to bring this about.

The language of destitution (egere, egestas) is Scriptural.¹⁵ Augustine is echoing the story of the Prodigal Son from Luke's gospel, and that story, uniquely in the New Testament, uses the language of substance (substantia, Greek ousia) to depict the process of loss involved in sin. What the prodigal demands from his father (from God) is the portion of substantia due him. This is (Augustine thinks) to demand ownership or control over what he is: your substantia is what you essentially are, what makes you you. It is a gift freely given by God, and to demand it for yourself is to make it less than it is by turning it into an object wholly owned instead of a gift freely received. The result is loss, and not just the simple loss of an object, but rather a cumulative process of loss, loss piled upon loss ("[the soul] slips and slides into what is less and less ..."), loss tending exactly toward nothing. The prodigal becomes destitute: he has consumed his substance (dissipavit substantiam suam ... omnia consummasset, Luke 15:13-14) until there is almost nothing left. And this, surely, is just what it would mean to go out of existence altogether: to be devoid of substantia is to be annihilated. The prodigal turns back from the brink: he repents, and has his substance returned to him as a result. His destitution leaves him still the capacity for repentance, a sole remaining human capacity as he lives with the pigs and eats what they eat. And when he exercises that capacity, everything else—all the rest of his substance—is returned to him by the merciful father.¹⁶

This language of loss and diminution clearly suggests the possibility of coming to nothing, of annihilation stricto sensu. That is what gives it the undeniable power it has. For Augustine, as for most of the fathers of the Church, the possibility of self-annihilation is suggested by an ontology of participation and gift. On this view, the fact that you are is sheer unmerited gift, and what you are is a participant in God. Sin is the rejection of gift, and thereby the rejection of participatory being. The result is loss of a properly ontological sort, and it is a loss that proliferates and multiplies as the sinner, the loser, attempts to grasp ever more firmly what is not there at all: the illusion of a mode of being independent of God. This proliferative loss eats away at the soul, causing the progressive loss of its distinctive properties (freedom, choice, judgment, understanding, virtuous habit, and so on) to the point where the soul returns to that from which it came: nihil, nothing, the void, simple absence. The prodigal approaches this condition. All that's left to him is the capacity to repent and ask the father to be given once again the substance he has consumed. Were he to have lost that capacity, too, he would have ceased to be, for that was the last remaining capacity

¹⁵ In saying this I mean that it echoes the Latin versions of Scripture that were familiar to Augustine. For him, the authoritative Scriptural texts were Greek (the Septuagint for the Old Testament and the original Greek for the New), but he read and knew these mostly in Latin versions, of which there was more than one current in his time. He had an interesting exchange of letters with Jerome on the propriety of making new translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew rather than Greek, a procedure to which he objected on the principal ground that the Greek text of the Old Testament had been treated as authoritative by the authors of the New.

¹⁶ Augustine often uses the language of Luke 15 to describe the nature and results of sin. See, e.g., Confessiones, 2.3.5-2.10.18. In my interpretation I draw upon Jean-Luc Marion, God Without Being: Hors-Texte (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 95-102; Danuta Shanzer, "Pearls Before Swine: Augustine Confessions 2.4.9," Revue des Études Augustiniennes 42 (1996), 45-5; H. Derycke, "Le vol des poires, parabole du péché originel," Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique 88 (1987), 337-348.

that distinguished him from the pigs, the last remaining property that distinguished him from nonhuman existence. When the body is sufficiently corrupted, it dies; when the soul is sufficiently corrupted, it ceases to be. In both cases, what's left is the trace, or what Augustine calls the vestigium. For the body, that means decaying material components; for the soul it means psychic detritus of various sorts. But in either case, it means annihilation on the definition in play here.¹⁷

Augustine, along with most other Christian thinkers, does not accept this conclusion even though his language and his ontological assumptions suggest that he might—suggest, that is, not only that the soul's definition permits the possibility that it come to nothing, but also that there is much about the soul and its powers which suggests that it inevitably does tend toward the nothing from which it came. He is representative of most Christian thinkers in this refusal, but unlike many, his language often undercuts this refusal even when it is being explicitly offered. Consider the following passage:

The human soul is truly said to be immortal, but it nevertheless has its own kind of death. To call the soul immortal is to say that it does not cease to live and to experience, no matter how little. But the body is mortal because it can be abandoned by all life since it does not at all live from itself. The death of the soul happens, therefore, when God abandons it, just as that of the body happens when the soul abandons it. And so the death of both together, which is to say of the whole human being, occurs when a soul deserted by God deserts the body. For then the soul does not live from God, and the body does not live from the soul. In this way there occurs the death of the whole human being, which the authority of divine speech calls the second death.¹⁸

The central analogy that Augustine uses to link the first death with the second in this passage is that of desertion or abandonment. When the body is abandoned by the soul, it is left behind completely and irreversibly. That is what abandonment means. When the body is left in this way, death is the result, as Augustine explicitly says. This death is the death of the body; it is also, in the terms of this essay, the annihilation or bringing to nothing of the body. The body's lifelessness just is its annihilation. All that's left of a soulless body (as anyone who has seen dead bodies knows very well) is the physical trace. The dead human body is no longer a corpus humanum, a human body, at all; neither is it a corporeal substance. It is detritus, to be scattered, pulverized, buried, or burned. By analogy, one might expect Augustine to say, when God has completely or irreversibly abandoned the anima humana, the human soul, it too is brought to nothing, annihilated. Augustine does say that the soul

¹⁷ Augustine gives a very clear exposition of the logic of loss, damage, and annihilation in *Confessiones*, 7.12.18.

¹⁸ "... anima humana veraciter immortalis perhibetur, habet tamen quandam etiam ipsa mortem suam. Nam ideo dicitur immortalis, quia modo quodam quantulocumque non desinit vivere atque sentire; corpus autem ideo mortale, quoniam deserit omni vita potest nec per se ipsum aliquatenus vivit. Mors igitur animae fit cum eam deserit Deus, sicut corporis cum id deserit anima. Ergo utriusque rei, id est totius hominis, mors est cum anima Deo deserta deserit corpus. Ita enim nec ex Deo vivit ipsa nec corpus ex ipsa. Huius modi autem totius hominis mortem illa sequitur quam secundam mortem divinatorum eloquiorum appellat auctoritas." *De civitate dei*, 13.2. In referring to the divinum eloquium Augustine has in mind the use of the phrase mors secunda in Revelation 20:6.

dies, and he gives no reason in the quoted passage not to read God's desertion of the human soul in the same way as the soul's abandonment of the human body. If it were to be read in the same way, the conclusion would be that the soul bereft of God is no longer a human soul, because among the things that defined it as such was exactly God's presence to it as sustainer of it in being. Without that, whatever remains is a trace—not a corporeal trace, as with what's left when the soul abandons the body, but rather a noncorporeal trace, psychic detritus without any principle of identity that could permit it to continue in being.

On this interpretation, the second death would be the bringing of the soul to nothing, its annihilation. And the plausibility of this reading is deepened by recalling the pervasiveness in Augustine of emphasis upon the idea that the anima humana is brought into being out of nothing and has a constant tendency to damage itself by losing being, by tending toward the nothing from which it came. A soul bereft of God would necessarily be nothing, for only God's graceful act brought it into being, and only God's graceful act sustains it in being. Without these, it comes to nothing. The second death does to the soul what the first death does to the body: brings it to nothing.

But Augustine resists this conclusion, in the passage quoted and consistently elsewhere. And he does so in spite of the fact that the grammar of his thought strongly supports it. "The human soul is truly said to be immortal," he says, which is to say that it never ceases to live (vivere) and to experience (sentire). But why is this so? Why is it necessary to say that an anima humana related to God as a dead body is to a soul separated from it continues to be a subject of experience, and does so without end? What sustains, in Augustine and in the later tradition, the view that the human soul is necessarily immortal, no matter what damage it does to itself?

The impossibility of self-annihilation (1): Augustine and Aquinas

Augustine, in his early work De immortalitate animae, notes that it is hard to say why the animus,¹⁹ the human soul, should not come to nothing (ad nihilum cadere) since it is clear that it is subject to defects (defectus), and this suggests at least that it can be reduced in being, for defect is loss, and loss repeated and magnified might eventually bring the loser to nothing.²⁰ But then he goes on to give reasons why this cannot be so: why, that is to say, the soul cannot annihilate itself.

First, he says that the soul must be immortal because it is the locus for reason and order (ratio, disciplina), and since these never perish, it must also be the case that the anima does not perish.²¹ This argument appears to assume that if x is the locus for y, y cannot exist without x—on that reading, the relation 'is the locus of' would be one of necessary conditionality: without x, no y. Allowing that understanding, all that

¹⁹ Augustine sometimes uses animus and anima interchangeably. When he does make a distinction between them, it is to restrict animus to the human soul while using anima for any kind of soul (angelic, animal, vegetable).

²⁰ Augustine, De immortalitate animae, 7.12.

²¹ De immortalitate animae, passim.

follows from this first argument is that at any time some soul must exist, not that each and every soul must always exist.²²

The second argument is that even bodies extended in space cannot come to nothing, and how much more is this the case for souls, which are *melior et vivacior* (better and more lively, more alive) than bodies.²³ Augustine thinks that bodies cannot come to nothing because however small the parts into which they are divided, there is always something left—a version of Zeno's paradox of motion. But this is an understanding of what it is to come to nothing at odds with that in play in this essay. Augustine means only that once a body has existed there will always be traces of it, and that if this is true of bodies it must also be true of souls. This is right, but it is quite compatible with the view that particular bodies (and, by extension, particular souls) can come to nothing. A human body does so when it ceases to live, no matter what traces are left behind. This second argument, too, does not achieve what Augustine would like it to.

Augustine also several times makes use of an argument for the soul's immortality from our natural and universal desire for immortality. To be happy (*beatus*, blessed) is what everyone wants, he says—a claim that goes back at least to Aristotle, and that Augustine asserts from the beginning to the end of his career. But the desire for happiness entails desire for immortality: "For a person to live happily, he must live."²⁴ And since it is the case, Augustine thinks, that we are *beatitudinis capax*, we must also be *immortalitatis capax*.²⁵ This argument, however, shows not that each human being is inevitably or necessarily incapable of annihilation; it shows only that each human being possibly has an existence that does not come to an end. This claim is certainly essential to the grammar of fully Christian thought: without it there is no orthodoxy. But it is far from requiring the stronger claim that each human being is inevitably or necessarily beyond annihilation, and is quite compatible with conditional immortality.²⁶

Augustine does not sufficiently distinguish between the thesis that every soul is possibly immortal and the thesis that every soul is necessarily so. He wants to claim the second, but the reasons he gives for doing so are not probative. The tension I've indicated remains unresolved in Augustine. He certainly wants to say that annihilation does not and cannot occur for any human being, but he also wants to say that we can always move ourselves toward nothingness by self-diminution. And there the matter remains for him. Both threads are prominent in the fabric of his eschatological thought, but it is far from clear that a garment woven from both can hold together.

²² Augustine here assumes, probably, the existence of a single world-soul, on something like Plotinus' model. This was an assumption he came later to reject. Without some such assumption, the argument makes little sense.

²³ *De immortalitate animae*, 8.15.

²⁴ "Ut enim homo beate vivat, oportet ut vivat," from *De trinitate*, 13.8.11.

²⁵ I summarize here the version of the argument given in *De trinitate*, 13.8.11, but essentially the same argument is found in many other places.

²⁶ Aquinas also makes use of this argument, but he typically does so in a more modest fashion by saying that our natural desire for immortality (endless existence) is a *signum*, a sign, of the truth that our souls are intellectual substances and therefore necessarily incapable of coming to nothing. See, inter alia, *Summa contra gentiles*, 2.55.13; *Quaestiones de anima*, 14, corpus; *Summa theologiae*, 1.75.6, corpus.

Aquinas, on this matter as on so many an inheritor and elaborator of Augustine's thought, takes the same substantive position as Augustine on the essentials—that every human being is an embodied rational soul; that the rational soul survives the death of the body and can temporarily exist (though not as a human being) in a disembodied state;²⁷ and that each rational soul is reunited with its body at the general resurrection, and thereby becomes a human being for eternity in either Heaven or Hell—but uses a more precise (and in some respects more problematic) technical terminology to explain and defend the position, and more specifically that part of it which asserts the impossibility of annihilation for any human being.

In discussing whether the soul, the anima (also called anima rational, anima humana, anima intellectiva, terms effectively synonymous for the purposes of this discussion), can come to nothing, Aquinas usually asks whether it can be corrupted, which is to say whether corruptio is possible for it, whether it can become corrupta. Corruption, in turn, is defined as something's transformation or alteration (transmutatio, mutatio) away from being and toward nonbeing.²⁸ Corruption may be complete, in which case the thing corrupted ceases to be, as when formed matter loses its form in the death of an animate creature or the pulverization of an inanimate object;²⁹ or it may be partial, as when the corrupted thing loses some of its being, for example in the amputation of a limb from an animate body, or the removal of some part of an inanimate one. And he understands the anima humana as an intellectual substance (substantia intellectualis), sometimes referred to simply as intellectus.³⁰ Our question as it presented itself to Aquinas, therefore, was: is it possible for intellectual substances in general and the human soul in particular to undergo corruption, whether partial or complete? He answers both no and yes, and the two answers can be reconciled only with some difficulty.

The dominant answer is the negative one. Corruption is contrary to the definition of an intellectual substance, Aquinas thinks, which means that intellectual substances are not and cannot be subject to it. If every intellectual substance subsists in its own essence,³¹ which is a standard definition offered by Aquinas, this is just to say that existing is proper to it, and that it is not dependent upon anything external to or other than itself. It follows from this definition that substances of this kind cannot lose being,³² which, put differently, is also to say that they have no potential whatever for nonbeing.³³ Once such things are, they necessarily continue to be. They cannot be

²⁷ On this Thomas strikingly writes in commenting on I Corinthians 15:17-19: "Anima autem cum sit pars corporis hominis, non est totus homo, et anima mea non est ego," quoted by Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 2: Spiritual Master (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 257, n.12. See also Brian Davies, O.P., Aquinas (New York: Continuum, 2003), 110.

²⁸ For this definition see Scriptum super libros Sententiarum, 2.19.1, ad 1; Summa contra gentiles, 2.55 throughout, but especially 2.55.3, 2.55.7.

²⁹ Summa contra gentiles, 2.55.1-3. Thomas does say (in Summa contra gentiles, 2.55.4) that corruption never produces absolute nonbeing, but by this he means that a trace always remains, not that the thing itself does.

³⁰ For this usage see Compendium theologiae, 84.

³¹ "Intellectus ... substantia subsistens in suo esse," from Compendium theologiae, 84.

³² "Impossibile est igitur quod ipsae [formae] esse desinant," Summa contra gentiles, 2.55.3.

³³ See Summa contra gentiles, 2.55.5, 2.55.14 ("Proprium naturis intellectualibus est quod sint perpetuae"). Compare Quaestiones de anima, 14, corpus: "Si ergo sit aliqua forma quae sit habens esse, necesse est illam formam incorruptibilem esse."

reduced or brought to nothing by anything other than themselves, and moreover there is nothing intrinsic to themselves that permits or forces them to tend toward nonbeing. Were there anything of this sort, the incoherent result would be separetur a seipsa,³⁴ that it would become separated from itself.

This is a piece of broadly Aristotelian metaphysics. If a particular substance (a particular existent that bears properties) is noncorporeal, this means that it has no necessary dependence upon anything corporeal.³⁵ For a particular substance to be intellectual, capable of having knowledge, is for it to be noncorporeal. And the human soul is, by definition, an intellectual and therefore noncorporeal substance, from which it follows that it has no necessary dependence upon anything corporeal. The final move is then to say that corruption belongs only to bodies, to the corporeal. This series of definitions yields the following summary position, of which Aquinas says that it is the one quam fides nostra tenet, the one held by our faith:

That the intellective soul [the soul capable of understanding] is a substance not dependent on a body; that there are as many intellective substances as there are bodies; that they continue as separated [substances] when [their] bodies are destroyed without passing into other bodies; and that in the resurrection each [separated soul] assumes again a body numerically identical with the one it had laid down [at death].³⁶

Aquinas here (and in many other places) affirms inevitable immortality of a particular sort. What provides the possibility of such immortality for each human being is that one part of that human being, the soul, does not die when another part of it, the body, dies. But it is not the kind of immortality that permits passage of that soul into new and different bodies. No, a particular soul exists in only one of two ways: either as embodied in one and the same body ("numerically identical," idem corpus numero³⁷), or as "separated," not embodied at all. But each and every intellective soul must necessarily, once it comes into existence, continue to exist in one of these two ways because of the impossibility, given the kind of thing it is, that it can be corrupted.

That is Aquinas' negative answer to the question of whether an intellectual substance—a soul—can undergo corruption. It is the dominant answer. But there is also a positive answer.

Consider the following claim, made by an objector: "Furthermore, everything that comes from nothing is capable of returning to nothing. But the human soul is

³⁴ This phrase is from Summa theologiae, 1.75.6, corpus, where Aquinas is discussing utrum anima humana sit corruptibilis. Étienne Gilson glosses this with his customary lucidity in The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, transl. L. K. Shook (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002; first published 1956), 188.

³⁵ "Anima intellectiva habet esse absolutum, non dependens ad corpus." Scriptum super libros Sententiarum, 2.19.1, corpus.

³⁶ "[Q]uod anima intellectiva sit substantia non dependens ex corpore, et quod sint plures intellectivae substantiae secundum corporum multitudinem, et quod destructis corporibus remanent separatae, non in alia corpora transeunt sed in resurrectione idem corpus numero quod deposuerat unaquaqueque assumat." Scriptum super libros Sententiarum, 2.19.1, corpus.

³⁷ A great deal could be said about what, for Aquinas, makes a body at a particular time numerically identical with a body at another time. But those are debates beyond the scope of this essay.

created out of nothing, and is therefore capable of returning to nothing. And so it follows that the soul is corruptible."³⁸ Aquinas answers that, yes, of course it's true that whatever came from nothing can return to nothing "unless it might be kept in being by the hand of the one who rules it. But it is not said to be a corruptible thing because of this; [it would be so described] if there were some principle of corruption intrinsic to it. It's in this sense that 'corruptible' and 'incorruptible' are essential predicates."³⁹

Aquinas acknowledges here that the human soul is vertibile in nihil, capable of returning toward nothing, which is to say capable of approaching annihilation. He squares this with his earlier insistence that the human soul is by definition incapable of being corrupted by claiming that calling something 'corruptible' is claiming that it is essentially so, while to say the human soul can be brought to nothing if God does not continue to preserve it in being is to attribute the soul's loss of being not to itself but to something extrinsic to it. And since this is not to predicate essentially, it follows that even if we allow that the soul can be brought to nothing by God's action (or inaction), this does not amount to saying that the soul is corruptible. Fair enough. The upshot, though, is that even though on Aquinas' usage it remains proper to say that the human soul is not corruptible, this remains quite consistent with the claim that the human soul can be brought to nothing.⁴⁰

The most direct and clear treatment by Aquinas of these difficult questions is in q.104 of the first part of the Summa Theologiae. This question discusses God's conservatio of the cosmos, and the first point made therein is that yes, of course, every creature must be 'conserved', maintained or kept in being, by God. If it were not, it would cease to be: sine eo [sc. Deo] esse non possit.⁴¹ All creatures (and this includes us) receive esse from God as the air receives light from the sun: so long as the sun shines (God conserves) the air is full of light (beings continue to be); when the sun doesn't shine (God ceases to conserve) darkness falls (beings cease to be).⁴² But human beings, since we are (on Aquinas' view) embodied rational souls (which, for the reasons already canvassed, have no natural capacity for nonbeing), can come to nothing only if God ceases to conserve us. God's so ceasing would be both necessary and sufficient for our ceasing to be.

³⁸ "Praeterea omne quod est ex nihilo est vertibile in nihil. Sed anima humana ex nihilo creata est. Ergo vertibilis est in nihil. Et sic sequitur quod anima sit corruptibilis." Quaestiones de anima, 14, obj.19.

³⁹ "... nisi manu gubernantis conservetur. Sed ex hoc non dicitur aliquid corruptibile, sed ex eo quod habet in se aliquod principium corruptionis. Et sic corruptibile et incorruptibile sunt praedicata essentialia." Quaestiones de anima, 14, ad 19. Fundamentally the same point is made at Scriptum super libros Sententiarum, 2.19.1, ad 7; Summa theologiae, 1.50.5, ad 3; 1.75.6, ad 2.

⁴⁰ It's interesting to note, too, that Aquinas' way of responding to this objection commits him to the claim that being created out of nothing is not essential or proper to the anima humana. This is what makes it possible for him to speak of the human soul as an intellectual substance without also speaking of it as brought into being ex nihilo by God. This is to give altogether too much independence to natura—Augustine's epigram about the Pelagians, that the enemies of grace hide themselves in the praise of nature (Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum, 2.1.1) begs for application.

⁴¹ Summa Theologiae, 1.104.1, corpus.

⁴² Aquinas takes the point and some of the arguments from Augustine, De Genesi ad litteram, 4.12.22-23.

Next,⁴³ Aquinas asks whether God is able to return any creature to nothing (aliquid in nihilum redigere), and answers that God's freedom means that he could at any time take any creature out of existence. Just as he is not constrained by the necessity of his nature to create anything in the first place, but does so freely, so he is not constrained to conserve any particular creature. Any one of us (or all of us) could, therefore, come to nothing. It's worth noting that this position contradicts Augustine's. For him, the anima Deo deserta does not cease to be; for Aquinas, anything Deo deserta would have to come to nothing.

But q.104 doesn't end at that point. Having established that God's ceasing to conserve would be both necessary and sufficient for any human being's coming to nothing, he goes on to ask whether as a matter of fact anything is brought to nothing. And the answer to this is no. In rational creatures non est potentia ad non esse,⁴⁴ as already noted, and God will not cease to conserve any of us because to do so would not make his free and graceful gift evident (non pertinet ad gratiae manifestationem)⁴⁵). The conclusion is that no rational creature comes to nothing because the only condition that could bring this about lacks convenientia: it is, that's to say, something God wouldn't do, something inappropriate to his nature.

Aquinas is forced in this question to approach a self-contradiction. In the response to one objection he says that creatures possess intrinsically (ex seipsa) a tendency toward nonexistence;⁴⁶ in another place he says that creatures have no potential for nonexistence.⁴⁷ It is possible with some work to resolve this apparent contradiction, but the presence of the two claims in the same question does dramatize the tension in Aquinas' position. On the one hand we have no tendency toward (no possibility of) coming to nothing because we are immaterial substances, and such, by definition, lack such tendencies. But on the other hand, being created out of nothing as we are, we must have such a tendency, and this is again because of the kind of being we are.⁴⁸ So we are beings who in one respect find nonbeing impossible and in another tend toward it.

Aquinas' position is of course not compatible with the claim that we can bring ourselves to nothing. For him, were any one of us to be brought to nothing, this would have to be because of something God does or does not do. This yields an important difference between Thomistic and Augustinian thought. For Aquinas (and so also for Thomists), our nature as (in part) intellectual substances makes it impossible for us to damage ourselves so that we tend toward nonexistence. And for Augustine and Augustinians, such talk is unavoidable: it is the only proper construal of sin. This

⁴³ I omit comment on Aquinas' discussion of whether God conserves mediately or immediately in Summa Theologiae 1.104.2: interesting but irrelevant to my purposes here.

⁴⁴ Summa Theologiae, 1.104.4, corpus.

⁴⁵ Summa Theologiae, 1.104.4, corpus.

⁴⁶ "Sic igitur Deus non potest esse causa tendendi in non esse; sed hoc habet creatura ex seipsa in quantum est de nihilo," Summa Theologiae, 1.104.3, ad 1.

⁴⁷ "in eis [sc. in creaturis] non est potentia ad non esse," Summa Theologiae, 1.104.4, corpus.

⁴⁸ It's interesting to note that most scholarly treatments of Aquinas on the soul's immortality pass over almost in silence the claim that we have a capacity for extinction because we are created ex nihilo. Herbert McCabe's "The Immortality of the Soul: The Traditional Argument," in Anthony Kenny, ed., Aquinas: A Collection of Critical Essays (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 297-306, is entirely representative in this respect.

difference will dispose Augustinians toward taking the possibility of self-annihilation more seriously than Thomists are likely to do.

Augustine denies that our propensity toward and capacity for self-annihilation is ever brought to term, but leaves it unclear why. Aquinas denies that we have any such capacity, while affirming that we would indeed be brought to nothing if God were to desert us. Augustine, as I've shown, defines damnation, the second death, in exactly these terms with the formula totius hominis mors est cum anima Deo deserta deserit corpus. The verb here, deserere, is worth comment. Serere means to link, connect, couple, or join; de-serere therefore means most fundamentally to unlink, decouple, separate, disconnect, and then, by extension and intensification, to abandon, desert, depart from. Augustine, ever sensitive to verbal connotation and echo, means all this. When God deserts us—and God does desert the damned—we are truly bereft, left deserted and destitute, left with nothing but ourselves. And if you came into being out of nothing and are kept in being only by God's continued presence and caress, then to be left with nothing but yourself is in fact to be left with nothing. Aquinas agrees that if we were deserted by God we would come to nothing, but denies that God ever in fact deserts us: all of us, even the damned, are conserved, kept in being, exactly because God always and inevitably remains present to us.

Neither Augustine's position nor Aquinas' is satisfactory. Augustine's unsatisfactoriness lies in his unwillingness to have the courage of his convictions and draw the conclusion not only that we have the capacity to take ourselves out of existence, but that God permits some of us to do so. Aquinas' unsatisfactoriness lies in his unwillingness to permit us even the capacity to act in such a way as to corrupt—move from being toward nonbeing—ourselves. There is, I think, a better way, a position that permits affirmation of the possibility of self-annihilation, and, following Augustine's definition of the second death, of self-annihilation as identical with damnation. To that I'll turn in the final section of this essay, but first—at least for Catholics—some comment on magisterial teaching on this question is necessary.

The impossibility of self-annihilation (2): the magisterium

The magisterium has consistently claimed that the soul, and with it the human being, is immortal, and has sometimes clearly defined as doctrinal error the view that it is or may be mortal. Such magisterial teaching has, however, not usually made a clear distinction between the thesis that every soul—and with it every human being—is necessarily incapable of coming to nothing, on the one hand; and the thesis that every soul—and with it every human being—is possibly incapable of coming to nothing, on the other. There are also magisterial texts that appear, by their tendency toward the view that there are two, and only two, final ends (eternal bliss and eternal suffering), to rule out the possibility of annihilation.

Prominent among magisterial texts of this latter kind is Benedictus Deus, a Constitution promulgated by Benedict XII in 1336.⁴⁹ Benedict's central purpose in this

⁴⁹ I've consulted the Latin text in H. Denzinger & A. Schönmetzer, ed., Enchiridion Symbolorum (36th ed., Rome: Herder, 1976), §§530-531.

text was to exclude the possibility that the saved are elsewhere than Heaven and the damned elsewhere than Hell during the period between their deaths and the day of the final and general judgement. Instead, those who die in actuali peccato mortale descend at once (mox) to Hell, where they suffer the pains of Hell until, at the day of judgement, they appear embodied before Christ to get what's finally coming to them, which is eternal embodied life in either Heaven or Hell (with numerous qualifications in the former case about purgatorial suffering). Benedict's interest here is not in the possibility (or impossibility) of annihilation; it is only in emphasizing the importance of thinking, first, that everyone's final end is set (though not necessarily that it is known to them) at their death; that there is no lag between death and the experiential beginning of that end; and that among the possible ends is endless embodied suffering. This last point does not contradict my suggestion that annihilation is possible; it would do so only if the categories into which Benedict divides human beings were exhaustive, which the Constitution does not say. It does contradict the view that the only two eternal ends possible for us are the beatific vision and annihilation, but since the Constitution does not say that as a matter of fact anyone meets the conditions for eternal embodied suffering, it remains compatible with the view that, first, annihilation is possible; and, second, that no one in fact suffers eternally. In this it is typical of magisterial texts on Hell and damnation; and there are many Scriptural and magisterial texts that affirm the possibility that no one is damned much more forcefully than the bare possibility of this provided by a strong reading of Benedictus Deus.⁵⁰

But the question of magisterial teaching on the possibility of Hell's emptiness is not the central issue here, for every position on that question is neutral to the question of whether annihilation for some is possible. Of more interest is what the magisterium has to say about immortality, whether of soul or person; for if all persons are necessarily immortal, then annihilation is not possible.

And on that question there are some interesting materials, among which is the discussion at the eighth session of the Fifth Lateran Council, held on 19th December 1513, of the mortality of the soul.⁵¹ The council fathers identified as among the perniciosissimi errores introduced by the ancient enemy the view that the anima rational (also called the anima intellectiva) is mortal (quod videlicet mortalis sit). In opposition to this view, the council fathers claimed that the soul is immortalis, quoting Matthew 10:28 ("They cannot kill the soul") and John 12:25 ("Whoever hates his soul in this world will keep it in eternal life"), and saying that if the soul is not immortal Christ's promises of eternal reward and punishment would be empty and the saints would be miserabiliores cunctis hominibus.

⁵⁰ A representative Scriptural text is I Timothy 2:4, which says that God wants everyone to be saved, which implies, with only a little conceptual work, the possibility of that result. A representative recent magisterial text on the subject is John Paul II's Redemptoris Missio, §§9-10 (text available in seven languages at www.vatican.va), where "the real possibility of salvation in Christ for all mankind" is affirmed. The best argument for universal salvation's possibility can be found in Hans Urs Von Balthasar's Dare We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved'?--With a Short Discourse on Hell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988; first published in German in 1987). This work spawned a vast and polemical response in all the major European languages, which still continues.

⁵¹ I've consulted the Latin text in Norman P. Tanner, ed., Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 605-608.

What's rejected here, it seems, is the view that the soul is necessarily mortal, that it belongs to its definition to cease to be. This is principally because, were this true, the eternal rewards and punishments spoken of by Christ would not be possible. The Scriptural verses quoted say that no one other than you can kill your soul,⁵² and that there is an eternal reward for those who merit it. These claims certainly entail the falsity of the claim that the soul is necessarily mortal, necessarily capable of being annihilated. But they are neutral with respect to the claim that the soul is possibly capable of annihilation, which is to say that there are circumstances under which it may come to nothing. The Fifth Lateran's claims are, then, at least *prima facie* compatible with the position that self-annihilation is possible, as they are also compatible with the position that it is not actual.

The Catechism, too, is explicit in its support of the claim that the soul is immortal, which it glosses to mean that " ... [the soul] does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection."⁵³ Authorities quoted in support of this claim are: the Fifth Lateran, already discussed; Paul VI's Professio Fidei (1968), which merely says that human beings (homines) are created by God with spiritual and immortal souls,⁵⁴ and Gaudium et Spes, a document from the Second Vatican Council which uses the same phrase.⁵⁵ These texts, while explicit and clear and most naturally read to rule out the possibility that any human soul can come to nothing, are obiter dicta. Their claims about the soul's immortality (and again, the distinction between the soul's necessary mortality and its possible or conditional mortality is not made) occur almost by the way, in contexts in which the argumentative focus is elsewhere. But the texts do show at least that it is almost a routine rule of composition that whenever the anima humana is mentioned, it must be characterized as spiritalis and immortalis.

In 1979, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a brief "Letter on Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology."⁵⁶ It was prompted, it claims, by a concern that the Church's teachings about eternal life have been to some extent undermined in the minds of the faithful—that even where they are still believed, they are not paid much attention. It reiterates the Church's central claims on these matters, among which is the following:

The Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, an element endowed with consciousness and will, so that the "human self" subsists, lacking, however, for a while, the complement

⁵² This is the surface meaning of the clause from Matthew 10:28 quoted above. The whole verse ("And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna," NAB) does appear to say that the soul can be killed. Augustine would interpret this to refer to the soul's second death, which on his view is not identical with its annihilation.

⁵³ Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.; Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1997), §366.

⁵⁴ Paul VI, Sollemnis Professio Fidei, §8, consulted at www.vatican.va on 15 August 2005.

⁵⁵ Gaudium et Spes §14, in Tanner, Decrees, 1077.

⁵⁶ I quote from the English version given at www.catholicculture.org/docs, consulted on 16 August 2005. I have not seen the Latin text.

of its body.⁵⁷ To designate this element, the Church uses the word "soul," the accepted term in the usage of Scripture and Tradition.⁵⁸

This is a clear affirmation that the soul continues after death. The Congregation's main interest in affirming this, however, is not to combat the view that the soul (and therefore the human being) is conditionally immortal, but rather to combat the view that it is not possibly immortal, that no interim disembodied state is possible. The document goes on to emphasize the importance of keeping the word 'soul' as a lively item of Churchly vocabulary; of avoiding doctrinal positions that "would render meaningless or unintelligible" prayers offered for the dead together with other modes of relating the living to the dead; and of avoiding claims about what happens to people when they die that would render incoherent the doctrine of the assumption. None of these matters has any direct bearing on the question of conditional immortality.

The Letter continues:

In fidelity to the New Testament and Tradition, the Church believes in the happiness of the just who will one day be with Christ. She believes that there will be eternal punishment for the sinner, who will be deprived of the sight of God, and that this punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner. She believes in the possibility of a purification for the elect before they see God, a purification altogether different from the punishment of the damned. This is what the Church means when speaking of Hell and Purgatory.⁵⁹

The phrases of relevance here are those that treat Hell. These phrases, especially "eternal punishment for the sinner," can be read in such a way as not to contradict the view that the ordinary meaning of damnation is annihilation. What, after all, could be more punishing for a being made for the eternal happiness of the *visio Dei* than to eternally lack that delight? Such lack would certainly be entailed by annihilation. And this interpretation is certainly compatible with the phrase "this punishment will have a repercussion on the whole being of the sinner." However, it must be admitted that the reading just suggested is unlikely to be the one the Congregation had in mind. It is much more likely that the term "punishment," thrice repeated in the paragraph quoted, was intended to imply that the damned continue to exist and to suffer, not that they go out of existence. However, the surface of the text does not immediately rule out the view that some human beings may go out of existence. The Letter certainly does not

⁵⁷ J. Neuner & J. Dupuis Neuner, The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church (7th ed.; New York: Alba House, 2001), 1026-1027 (where is to be found a partial English version of the Congregation's 1979 Letter) note that the Latin version of this letter published in Acta Apostolicae Sedis contains a clause—"interim tamen complemento sui corporis carens"—absent from that published in L'Osservatore Romano. I include this clause in the version quoted above (it is not in the version given at www.catholicculture.org) because the AAS version bears official doctrinal weight. The difference between the two versions is interesting, however. It indicates that giving a precise account of what happens in the interim state was a difficulty for the Congregation in 1979 in much the same way and for much the same reasons as it had been for Augustine 1600 years earlier.

⁵⁸ "Letter," §3.

⁵⁹ "Letter," §7.

make the distinctions between conditional and necessary immortality necessary for full discussion of this topic.

There is, then, little conciliar teaching of direct relevance to conditional immortality, and what little there is has other interests. Other magisterial teaching is somewhat more expansive, but even here, although there is considerable interest in rejecting the view that immortality is impossible for human beings and in affirming the view that damnation is possible, there is not much that speaks directly to annihilation as a form of (or as coextensive with) damnation. It remains possible for a Catholic thinker to speculate along these lines, which is what I shall now do.

Self-annihilation redivivus: a speculative position

So, what have we?

First, there is a consistent, persuasive, and elegant Augustinian position according to which we can annihilate ourselves. This position begins from three axioms. The first is that we have been brought into being by God from nothing, which means that we exist only as participants in God. This is the doctrine of creation as it should be rendered. The second is that we actively and inevitably seek to return to the nothing from which we came by attempting to extricate ourselves from participation in God. This is the doctrine of sin as it should be rendered. And the third is that there is nothing about us or about God that requires our inevitable failure at the annihilation we constantly attempt. From these axioms it follows that we may succeed, and that some of us may already have succeeded, which is to say that some human beings who once existed no longer do.

This Augustinian view may be extended easily in the following direction. Suppose damnation is defined as the definitive and irreversible success of the sinner at prosecuting the project of sin. That project, recall, is extrication from participation in God. Complete success at this would simply mean nonexistence, for participation in God is the only kind of existence there is; and if the success were not only complete but irreversible, the upshot would be a final nonexistence, annihilation without the possibility of reversal by new creation. Such a definition of damnation yields annihilation as a synonym. To be damned, definitively and irreversibly extricated from participation in God, would be to be brought to nothing. And so it would follow that if Hell is populated by the damned, Hell would have to be empty because those who have been brought to nothing populate nowhere.

Notice that this position is not the same as most varieties of universalism. Those doctrines typically (perhaps always) assume that there are two and only two final destinies, Heaven and Hell, and that each human being will occupy one or another of them for eternity. To say that Hell is empty on ordinary universalist assumptions, then, means that everyone is or will be in Heaven. But to say that Hell is empty on annihilationist assumptions means that those not in Hell aren't necessarily in Heaven either. They may instead have come to nothing.

There is another important difference between Hell's emptiness on universalist assumptions and the same on annihilationist assumptions—at least according to the

speculative version of annihilationism on offer here. On this version of annihilationism, it belongs to the very definition of Hell that it be empty. If Hell is the place of the damned, and the damned are those who have taken themselves out of existence, then Hell must be the place of no one.⁶⁰ It would be incoherent to suppose otherwise. For universalists, however, Hell's emptiness does not belong to the definition of Hell. It is, for them, not incoherent to suppose Hell inhabited. And even for those (few, perhaps none) who think universalism not just true but necessarily so, the necessity of Hell's emptiness is not derived from the definition of Hell together with a particular understanding of damnation's nature; rather, it is typically derived from a complex set of connections among particular understandings of God's nature and human nature.⁶¹

Annihilationism of the stripe under consideration here is also quite compatible with intense and long-lived post-mortem sufferings for those whose habits and character make this appropriate. It is also, interestingly, compatible with the view that not all of those undergoing such post-mortem sufferings are assured that they will end—though they are assured that while they continue they could end, whether in Heaven or annihilation.⁶² This is just to say that the sufferings after physiological death of those who do not at once begin to know as they are known are always open to either of the two ends mentioned. Experienceable suffering must always be open to ending by repentance or annihilation; it cannot by definition be irreversible as are the sufferings of those in Augustine's or Dante's Hell. A human being *Deo deserta* would, just because of that, be nonexistent. Those who suffer after death would be sure neither of their final salvation, as are those in Purgatory, nor of their final extinction. They would be, instead, like the prodigal among the swine, vastly reduced, in agony, but capable always of penitence that would issue in penance and forgiveness. To lose the capacity for such penitence would exactly be to be brought to nothing, to be *Deo deserta*.⁶³

This speculative annihilationism envisages only two final destinies: annihilation and full participation in God; or, to describe the same two differently, self-caused final and irreversible separation from God, and final acquiescence to God's offer of that blissful participation in himself which is beatitude. If, as the tradition almost universally asserts, the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the body, and the last judgment together mark the final separation of sheep from goats,

⁶⁰ It's worth noting that on the position I'm elaborating and entertaining here, the fairly settled view of the Church that we know the Devil to be damned and yet still to exist, requires modification. The direction of the modification, however, should be toward considering what is meant by speaking of the Devil's existence, and on this I would incline toward the picture sketched by Marion in *Prologomènes à la charité*, ch. 1.

⁶¹ If there is a version of universalism with which annihilationism of the kind considered here is compatible, it is a possibilist (preferably middle-knowledge) variant, according to which damnation is not possible, and annihilation is possible, though as a matter of fact no one is annihilated.

⁶² This was C. S. Lewis's view. He thought that the post-mortem sufferings of Hell may come to be seen, retrospectively, as those of Purgatory if you leave Hell. If you don't, they will always have been Hellish. See Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 39, 67.

⁶³ Again, Lewis approaches this view in *The Great Divorce*. During a discussion about whether a grumbling woman will cease grumbling long enough to take the chance of repentance being offered her, the angelic interlocutor says that this is possible "if there is a real woman—even the least trace of one—still there inside the grumbling" (74). But if not, if she's become nothing but a grumble and no longer a grumbler, there's nothing there to be saved. The same point is made in the depiction of the damned Bonaparte as nothing but a rant (20-21).

then there will be no resurrection for damnation, and Augustine's speculations about the nature of physical bodies fitted for eternal suffering will be relegated to their proper place, which is as theologoumena derived from a flawed eschatology. What there will be is resurrection for eternal life.

Before the final separation of sheep from goats (which will mean the goats' annihilation), there is as much scope as you like for suffering and torment, whether in this life (where it cannot be denied) or after physiological death. But this suffering will be of two kinds only. First, purificatory (purgatorial) suffering, belonging to those whose final beatitude is certain (though not necessarily to them) and who need to suffer only as do those seeking the healing of a diseased body by surgery. Second, open-ended suffering, belonging to those who have not yet either irrevocably damned themselves or irrevocably consented to God's offer of salvation. They suffer as did the prodigal among the swine.

I present this view not as the correct one, the one Christians ought to hold, but rather as a view that Christians would do well to entertain. I entertain it myself, taking it to have many advantages and on the whole to be preferable to its major competitors. I do no more than entertain it, however, because I take it that no fully detailed eschatology can have the kind of credibility that demands assent from Christians.⁶⁴ Some eschatological claims do demand such assent, being sufficiently deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition that they form part of the grammar of orthodoxy. Among these I would include the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, with its concomitant anthropological claim that no human being can exist as such absent a body; the doctrine that eternal beatitude is possible for each human being; and the doctrine that productive and loving relations are possible between the dead and the living. But beyond that, all is speculation, and even the claims just mentioned are capable of many different construals. The history of Christian thought about the post-mortem destinies of human beings is a series of attempts, often beautiful and inspiring, sometimes grimly terrifying, to put these non-negotiable elements together into pictures and systems. These pictures ought, without exception, to be entertained rather than taught as dogma, and for the most part the Catholic Church both represents and advocates this modesty with respect to eschatological speculation. It may be that Protestants are, in general, somewhat less modest about these matters.

What are the main objections to the speculative annihilationism I've presented here?

The first, and for most Christians I expect the most pressing, is that one thing or another in the tradition's authoritative sources—Scripture, and (for Catholics) magisterial tradition—contradicts and thus rules out one or more of the central claims of this variety of annihilationism. I shall not say more about objections of this sort here. My brief comments above on (Catholic) magisterial teaching show that I take the annihilationism entertained here to be at least possibly compatible with that teaching. And since I take that teaching to be a proper (though partial) development of what's said and implied by Scripture on these matters, the same applies to that. Scripture presents, on my view, no clear, unambiguously detailed picture of what happens at death, and those who think it does typically labor under a set of dubious

⁶⁴ For useful commendations of deep epistemic modesty in this sphere, see the Congregation's 1979 Letter, and the preface to Lewis's Great Divorce.

hermeneutical assumptions. Objections of this sort are important, therefore, but I do not think it likely that they will lead to the conclusion that the speculative annihilationism I'm entertaining should as a matter of principle not be entertained.

A second set of objections might center upon the idea that annihilationism does not treat free human action with sufficient moral seriousness. If, it might be said, I can annihilate myself by sinning, then I do not have to live with the consequences of my sin, and this makes my sin less morally serious than would be the case had I to suffer its consequences eternally.⁶⁵ This objection will be powerful for some. They will think that coming to nothing doesn't count as an eternal consequence of moral seriousness, or that at least it counts as less of one that would eternal torment of body and soul. Who, such objectors might say, wouldn't choose annihilation over torment? The answer, of course, is that many would not. Many find the idea of coming to nothing vastly more frightening—and, hence, more serious—than the idea of eternal torment. Consider Philip Larkin's lines:

The mind blanks at the glare ...
 ... at the total emptiness for ever,
 The sure extinction that we travel to
 And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
 Not to be anywhere,
 And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.⁶⁶

Nothing more terrible ... Larkin's understanding of the void of annihilation is, I expect, quite widely shared. For those who do share it, the objection under discussion here will not carry much weight. If, then, as I think, one of the criteria that ought to be used to discriminate eschatologies which ought to be entertained from those which ought not is the seriousness they give to human action here below, application of this criterion will not suffice to show that speculative annihilationism ought to be rejected.

A third objection might say that it is always better for persons to continue in being, even without possibility of salvation, than for them to go out of being by means of self-annihilation. Perhaps—though my confidence in my own or anyone else's capacity to judge which of two dreadful alternatives like these is better in God's eyes is sufficiently small that the 'perhaps' needs emphasis. But even if, per impossibile, it were to be established that it is better for someone to be damned than to cease to be, it still does not follow that God would not permit self-annihilation. There are many cases in which God does not prevent (and thus permits) the occurrence of a state of affairs worse than other possible states of affairs—for example, Eve's sin, and all subsequent sins. If, then, God would not and does not permit self-annihilation, it must

⁶⁵ See Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 136-138, for a discussion of this point.

⁶⁶ Lines from Philip Larkin's "Aubade" (1977), in Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), 190.

be for reasons other than that damnation is in his eyes better. And it remains obscure, to put it mildly, what such reasons might be. Aquinas thinks, as already noted, that God's permission of self-annihilation would lack convenientia, and that because it would not make God's grace manifest. But judgements about what does and what does not lack convenientia are notoriously difficult to assess.

A fourth set of objections might appeal to ideas about justice and punishment. We saw above that magisterial teaching often uses this language, and Scripture certainly does. An objector might say that divine justice requires that God punish sinners for their sin, and that such punishment requires at least that the one receiving it continue in being so that its flavor can be agonizingly tasted. There are large and difficult questions here, not least about God's nature and the nature of punishment. These questions are certainly worth pursuing, but it is clear enough at first blush that if punishment is defined as the loss of some good that would otherwise have been possessed, a loss produced as direct result of the actions of the one punished, then annihilation fills the bill just as well as eternal suffering. The good lost—beatitude—is the same in both cases, and the losing of it is a loss greater than which none can be conceived. To claim that pain experienced is, for the sufferer, worse than annihilation returns us to the previous objection, which I've already suggested is not remotely decisive. The only other difference in play might be one of agency. Perhaps, the objector might say, God must be involved as direct agent of punishment, one who requires and brings about pain rather than annihilation; and since speculative annihilationism makes the principal agent of annihilation the sinner rather than God, and annihilation does not involve pain, this is a disadvantage for speculative annihilationism.

This is a deep and important objection, but it cannot finally be sustained, I think—though all I can do in a single paragraph is indicate the most pressing reasons why this is so. Sin, the averting of sinners by their own actions from God's loving face, has nothing whatever to do with God. It is an absence, a horror, a grasp after nothing that succeeds in moving the graspers toward what they seek. God has nothing to do with the privation, the absence, that sinners seek. He cannot. He is the God who spoke the beautiful cosmos into being out of nothing, and his causal involvement in attempts to return it to nothing is and must be exactly zero. For God to inflict pain, eternally or temporarily, upon nothing-seekers, would be for him to recognize an absence as a presence and to respond to it as though it were something.⁶⁷ What he does instead is to enter into and pass through that absence by incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, thus remaking the cosmos away from the absence introduced into it by sin and toward the harmony of ordered beauty. The doctrine of the harrowing of Hell, implicit already in the Apostles' Creed, can stand as a symbolic representation of this view: God makes and remakes; he does not unmake, and the infliction of pain as punishment would be to contribute to unmaking. An objector who wishes to defend

⁶⁷ The pain that we suffer is always the result either of the damage to which the fall subjected the cosmos, or of the particular sins that we commit in that damaged cosmos. God does not punish us, if that means inflicting pain upon us in retribution for wrongs we have done. The only sense in which he can be said to punish us is that we, because we are damaged and sinful, may find God's caress painful. But such pain is epiphenomenal to love, and has the presence of damage—which is the presence of an absence—as its necessary condition. God, therefore, does not and cannot intend the infliction of pain, and has no causal implication with its occurrence. Pain is, without remainder, the felt component of absence being reduced by presence.

the necessity of God's agency in pain-producing punishment for those who attempt to unmake themselves is insufficiently serious about what it means to say that God is creator and redeemer, and therefore all too likely to make of God a local idol engaged in a cosmic battle with dark forces. Better, altogether more Christian, to say that the only thing God does for sinners is to remake them (by baptism, by killing the fatted calf to return their substance to them) when and whenever they ask, and that the only thing sinners can do for themselves is unmaking. Necesse est quod anima Deo deserta in nihilum cadat; and since God does not change, remove himself, punish, or condemn to Hell, this must occur by the sinner damaging himself sufficiently that God no longer sustains him—and perhaps can no longer sustain him.