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THE DARKLING LIGHTS OF LUCIFER: ANNIHILATION, TRADITION, AND HELL

Ross McCullough

I am ever tending toward nothing.

—*The Imitation of Christ*, III.40

Gregory of Nyssa is famous for defending both the doctrine of *epektasis*, the continual ascent of the blessed toward God, and, in places, the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, the eventual restoration to God of all creation, including the Devil. This is a curious conjunction, for while Gregory connects them more than adventitiously, the tradition of the Eastern Church has largely received the former and rejected the latter.¹ The point of this essay is to follow that intuition, not to say inspiration, of the tradition: briefly to challenge Gregory's conjunction and to develop from that challenge and with certain currents in philosophy of religion a conception of hell that is consistent with *epektasis*, avoids the implications of *apokatastasis*, and is itself attractive—which is to say, appropriately repulsive.

This will not be an attempt to reconcile *epektasis* with Western eschatology. The best such effort may be present, incipiently, in Maximus the Confessor's impossible "moving rest,"² itself a synthesis of the dynamic suggestions of Gregory with the static and sabbatical emphasis of the late Platonists, the early Origenists, and the Latins. This will also by its nature be closer to what philosophers call a "theodicy" than to what they call a "defense": more a plausible attempt at filling out the truth—here not the why but the what of hell—than a demonstration of certain doctrines'

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1. *Epektasis* continues to appear up through Palamas (see, for instance, *Triads*, II.3.35), whereas *apokatastasis* largely falls out of favor with the sixth-century condemnations of Origenism.

2. See, e.g., *Amb.* 67, *Q. Thal.* 59, 65.

logical coherence. I care to describe hell, darkly and in part, not to defend the mere compatibility of some two of its attributes. Here also Maximus gives the keynote: "It is not a matter of refuting the opinions of others, but of presenting one's own; not a matter of contesting some aspect of the teaching or behavior of others that seems not to be good but of writing on behalf of the truth."³

EPEKTASIS AND APOKATASTASIS

Although the doctrine of *epektasis* has antecedents in the ante-Nicene Fathers and in the other Cappadocians,⁴ it receives its most articulate treatment in Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory bases the idea of perpetual progress on the principle that the desire for God is never satisfied, expanding even as it is fulfilled. He writes of the follower of God: "He is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being."⁵ Passages like this ring with Gregory's own spiritual experience, but the idea is in his philosophical as well as his spiritual-ascetic works.⁶ In *Against Eunomius*, for instance, it is grounded in Gregory's more general philosophical claims about creation's dependence upon God:

For to the Godhead it properly belongs to lack no conceivable thing which is regarded as good, while the creation attains excellence by partaking in something better than itself; and further, not only had a beginning of its being, but also is found to be constantly in a state of beginning to be in excellence, by its continual advance in improvement, since it never halts at what it has reached, but all that it has acquired becomes by participation a beginning of its ascent to something still greater, and it never ceases, in Paul's phrase, "reaching forth to the things that are before, and forgetting the things that are behind" (Phil 3:13).⁷

3. In *Epistulam Dionysii* 6, quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe according to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 60.

4. See Everett Ferguson, "God's Infinity and Man's Mutability: Perpetual Progress according to Gregory of Nyssa," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 17, nos. 1-2 (1973): 60-61.

5. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 114 [par. 230].

6. For a brief analysis of the scholarship on the place and motivations of *epektasis* in Gregory and its relationship to his spiritual doctrine, philosophical theology, and criticism of Origenism, see Paul M. Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 2 (1992): 151-53.

7. *Against Eunomius*, VIII, NPNF V, 210.

The ascent is perpetual because its object is infinite:

The First Good is in its nature infinite, and so it follows of necessity that the participation in the enjoyment of it will be infinite also, for more will be always being grasped, and yet something beyond that which has been grasped will always be discovered, and this search will never overtake its Object, because its fund is as inexhaustible as the growth of that which participates in it is ceaseless.⁸

For our growth to be ceaseless, it is not enough that our object be infinite; our capacity to receive it must be capable of indefinite expansion. This, too, Gregory asserts: "Such are the wonders that the participation in the Divine blessings works: it makes him into whom they come larger and more capacious; from his capacity to receive it gets for the receiver an actual increase in bulk as well, and he never stops enlarging."⁹ Or more briefly, "Activity directed toward virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion."¹⁰

This ability endlessly to pursue the good, grounded in the infinity of God and therefore goodness, is matched by an inability endlessly to pursue evil in its finitude.

Now that which is always in motion, if its progress be to good, will never cease moving onwards to what lies before it, by reason of the infinity of the course to be traversed:—for it will not find any limit of its object such that when it has apprehended it, it will at last cease its motion: but if its bias be in the opposite direction, when it has finished the course of wickedness and reached the extreme limit of evil, then that which is ever moving, finding no halting point for its impulse natural to itself when it has run through the lengths that can be run in wickedness, of necessity turns its motion towards good: for as evil does not extend to infinity, but is comprehended by necessary limits, it would appear that good once more follows in succession upon the limit of evil; and thus, as we have said, the ever-moving character of our nature comes to run its course at the last once more back towards good.¹¹

Good is infinite and can be enjoyed forever; evil, bounded by good, can be indulged only so far before being exhausted. Here we see the connection between *epektasis* and *apokatastasis*: what makes perpetual progress possible, the limitlessness of good, is also that which by limiting evil determines the outcome of the peregrinations of the lost. Wander in wickedness long enough and you will reach its end, which can only give out upon the good.¹² Elsewhere Gregory suggests an anthropological

8. *Against Eunomius*, I, NPNF V, 62.

9. *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, NPNF V, 453.

10. *Life of Moses*, 113 [par. 226].

11. *On the Making of Man* 21:2, NPNF V, 410f.

12. See Jean Danielou, *L'être et le temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 196–97.

basis for this limit to the pursuit of evil: "The desire for anything harmful is transitory and insubstantial. It is alien to man right from the start, whereas that [good] alone with which we are familiar and are on intimate terms is both desirable and agreeable."¹³ Evil desire is unnatural desire, and unstable: no wickedness can become perpetual because we sooner or later come to our senses. This is matched by the stability of the natural desire for God that grounds perpetual progress, from whose good sense we never defect: "The heart flies upward through its stability in the good."¹⁴ Thus *apokatastasis* complements *epektasis* metaphysically, due to evil's finitude and good's infinity, and anthropologically, as the instability of natural desires yields to the stability of the pursuit of God.

THE UNMAKING OF MAN

I do not mean to synthesize these anthropological and metaphysical accounts but to work from a weakness they share. For while Gregory defends the expansion of the capacities of those approaching God, he puts less emphasis on the parallel condition of those receding from God: the diminution and corruption of the damned's capacities by sin. *Apokatastasis* is a possibility only if we retain sufficient intellectual and volitional capacities at the end of our descent into evil to recommit ourselves to the good.¹⁵ But this is by no means clear, especially if we work, as Gregory does, with data from the spiritual life: while our experience of the good shows that our "appetite is extended with the participation,"¹⁶ our experience of evil reveals even more markedly an erosion of the very capacities required to regain the right path. Gregory acknowledges this erosion, of course,¹⁷ and it explains why the exploration of evil that precedes *apokatastasis* consists not in the maunderings of chance but in a descent through "the course of wickedness" to "the extreme limit of evil."¹⁸ Each step down the course confirms us ever more in our blindness and hard-

13. *Concerning Those Who Have Died*, trans. Richard McCambly (accessible at <http://www.sage.edu/faculty/salomd/nyssa/>), section J.57. For an analysis of this account, see Jerome Gaith, *La conception de la liberté chez Grégoire de Nyse* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1953), 137–42.

14. *Life of Moses*, 118 [par. 244]. Some see Gregory's use of *epektasis* to be motivated at least in part by a desire to secure an eschatological stability that the Origenist system lacked. See Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress,'" 152f.

15. Especially, for Gregory, a sense of shame. See Gaith, *La conception de la liberté chez Grégoire de Nyse*, 139f.

16. *On Ecclesiastes* 2.

17. E.g., *Concerning Those Who Have Died*, J.57: "If we freely debase ourselves through passion, we will desire to do harm in the future."

18. *On the Making of Man* 21:2, NPNF V, 410. Note that in other places Gregory suggests that the evil are not so much making a single-minded descent but seeking to ascend upon shifting ground and so failing to make progress (e.g., *Life of Moses*, 243–44). Whether this is

heartedness. But in appending *apokatastasis* to the descent, Gregory assumes that we reach the bottom of evil still free to return to the good. He assumes, in brief, that we exhaust evil without also exhausting ourselves.

But what if there is no demonstration or Dante or *deus ex machina* to open a door from the basement of hell into the vestibule of heaven? What if persisting in perverse desires, however unstable, eventually prevents our reversion to the more stable passions? What if the finitude of evil is measured not against the infinite good but against the finite evildoer, and our descent kills us before it can save us? I suggested that one's mind on these issues is influenced by one's spiritual experience, and the difficulty with the spiritual experience of the saints is that it may sometimes be too felicitous to inspire this sense of an irreversibly evil course. Fortunately there is the Western Church, whose genius lies in producing saints intimately familiar with evil, and whose critics, though they might question how far it sees into heaven, do not doubt it sees rather far into hell.

That sin could kill is a possibility held open by Paul Griffiths, who works from an insight in the greatest of such Western saints, though indeed it is shared by most of the Fathers. Griffiths notes that for Augustine, sin is the diminution by misuse of the soul's capacities, a diminution whose logical end is destruction. "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."¹⁹ Augustine denies that it will quite come to that, refusing the conclusion that we are finally annihilated either by our own hand or God's, but his logic of participation suggests that such is the end of the way of the wicked. "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. . . . This proliferative loss eats away at the soul, causing the progressive loss of 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."²⁰

Still, it is not clear that we can actually reach the point of nothingness. Even granting that sin erodes one's being by diminishing one's essential capacities, why should we think that loss could be total and those capacities could be destroyed?²¹ Perhaps we should not—it is hard

a separate class of sinners or an alternate description of the descent or simply an equivocation is not clear.

19. Paul Griffiths, "Self-Annihilation or Damnation? A Disputable Question in Christian Eschatology," in *Liberal Faith: Essays in Honor of Philip Quinn*, ed. Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 89–90.

20. Griffiths, "Self-Annihilation or Damnation?" 92.

21. This case is made against Griffiths by Claire Brown and Jerry Walls, "Annihilationism: A Philosophical Dead End?" in *The Problem of Hell: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Joel Buenting (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 47–53.

to know how long a leash God gives us in these things without looking to revelation, which will be discussed more below—but note that even so we have enough to sever Gregory's connection between *epektasis* and *apokatastasis*. The only way to descend without annihilation is never fully to exhaust those capacities whose exhaustion is a symptom of sin; it is never fully to plumb the depths of evil, which would be destruction. Evil, in Gregory's scheme, may still be limited, but then its exploration must be acknowledged to sap progressively the energy of the explorer so that she never reaches its limits. Sin corrupts both the force and the direction of her will: confirmed ever more in her blindness, laboring ever more for that which does not satisfy, she turns more and more to evil with less and less effect.²² Dissolute, involute, her growing self-absorption is matched only by a growing frailty. The accelerating progress of those in heaven, whose possession spurs them on with greater capacity and greater desire, is then matched not by a descent with a saving peripety but by an indefinite, decelerating inanition that never quite kills the damned, but never can save them, either.²³

This view, indeed, has much to recommend it. *Epektasis* is based on Gregory's belief, disputed by some in the West, that our having-come-into-being implies a changeableness in our nature that persists in heaven as perpetual change for the good.²⁴ But the scholastics had no problem acknowledging mutability in the damned. Indeed, as Thomas says, the damned are properly speaking still in time.²⁵ Though he takes this to mean that they suffer a succession of punishments rather than what Griffiths, reading Augustine, calls a "diminution toward nonexistence, the dying fall of a diminuendo that will (or may) end in silence,"²⁶ still their basic temporality would allow this sort of perpetual fall away from God. That desire expands when fulfilled, which is the motive force of *epektasis*, might be disputed by those Western Christians who would see in heaven our capacities entirely engaged and our desires entirely satisfied. But as Griffiths represents, no one in the Augustinian heritage—no one with a doctrine of the Fall—would deny that the turn from God that is consummated in hell involves not only disengaging our capacities but

22. "So [the mind] turns away from [God] and slithers and slides down into less and less, which it imagines to be more and more." Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 10.5.7.

23. In *On Infants' Early Deaths* (NPNF V, 378), Gregory mentions that Judas could experience eternal purgative chastisements. Whether this eternal purgative process might be effectively indistinguishable from an eternal destructive process is not clear, and as Gregory does not explore his suggestion in any way systematically, it is hard to know what to make of it or its relation to *apokatastasis*.

24. See Ferguson, "God's Infinity and Man's Mutability," 68f.

25. "The fire of hell is called eternal only because it never ends. . . . In hell true eternity does not exist, but rather time." *ST* I.10.3 ad 2.

26. See Griffiths, "Self-Annihilation or Damnation?" 91.

their real diminishment. Hell, like the sin which is its seed, is not just a failure to look upon God but a loss of our very clear-sightedness; it is both the misuse and the destruction of our freedom. It is ontological loss, if not through continued postmortem sin then through the progressive actualization of that decisive break with God that happens at the Judgment. The damned have chosen, finally, for the idols, and out of respect for their free choice, God allows them to become more and more like what they have made.²⁷

For those with the Aristotelian fever, who take their medicine in substance and accident, a useful parallel is Thomas's account of divinization. For as in that great mystery we participate accidentally in a form that makes little sense unless understood (in some extended sense) at the level of substance—Form, or the form of God—so here we are participating accidentally and increasingly in the dissolution of substantial form. That we never finally realize these substantial changes substantially, and that the exact nature of their accidental application therefore remains unclear, is as much a charge against the adequacy of the empyreal explanation as against the infernal one. And the charge is just, for these are not very clean explanations—but then our subject does not admit of cleanliness. It is clear that we can take on accidentally the essential properties of others, as water takes on an essential property of fire when it is heated. And it is clear that our essential properties can be expanded or occluded, if not destroying us then at least rendering us unrecognizable, as gods or beasts. But what exactly that looks like—whether the damned are being frozen into lifelessness like those in Dante's final circle or, like Tolkein's ring wraiths, withering away from all that makes them men without thereby forsaking their humanity—is a subject that cannot be much explicated on this side of the veil.

This is all to say that the picture of hell sketched here coheres with broader Christian claims about ontology, mutability, and evil. But why should this ontological loss be progressive? Why not a hell in which each sinner is locked into that degree of attenuated being that she has chosen for herself? There are two reasons a specifically progressive view is attractive: the second will be suggested below, after some remarks on temporality; the first has to do with general intuitions about justice.

Traditional views of hell and its eternity have long faced a proportionality objection: how is it just for God to punish finite sins with infinite suffering? How is it just to set up an order in which the mistakes of a

27. How this actualization is progressive is explored more below. Note that though I have framed this idea largely with hell as a natural consequence of sin, the sort of progressive annihilation I sketch here could equally well be conceived in terms of God's active punishment of sinners.

short and nescient life result in limitless torment? The common traditional answer is that our continued defiance in hell justifies the continued suffering it entails: the soul turned from God gets only what it deserves, for every moment it deserves it, and this happens to endure forever. The immediate rejoinder is that those in hell traditionally conceived cannot turn back toward God, and it hardly seems just to be punished for actions you can in no way avoid. Some indeed hold a mild form of escapism—defending the ability of the damned to leave hell, however improbable—on precisely these grounds.²⁸ But we need not go so far as the escapists, for we can grant that the suffering of the damned is everlasting without granting that it is infinite. In particular, if the damned are forever diminishing, it is reasonable to think that their ability to suffer diminishes as well. What Christ calls the destruction of *both soul and body in hell* presumably includes the destruction of those sensory faculties that mediate between the two, as it also includes the destruction of those cognitive capacities that allow mere pain to be experienced as suffering. As Dr. Johnson remarks, “He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.” While we may not always see sinners’ physical faculties diminish in this life, the spiritual observer will remark something of their cognitive and volitional corruption,²⁹ and the biblical account of the Fall suggests that sin does indeed have physical consequences, with hagiography suggesting as much of sanctity. Granted, then, that our ability to suffer diminishes in hell, and that the amount of suffering diminishes correspondingly, it is entirely plausible that hell last forever without its torments exceeding a finite limit.³⁰

28. See, e.g., Charles Seymour, *A Theodicy of Hell* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 88–89. A sort of *apokatastasis* could be smuggled through the possibilities opened by escapism, though Seymour notes the power of habit in confirming us in hell. So long as we exist, God could presumably give us the prevenient grace necessary to make our return to blessedness possible; one way to construe the tradition’s disavowal of escapism is to hold that hell includes the decisive rejection of even this sort of grace, which we are not given the ability to reject decisively before the judgment. For the case that God would not remove this grace from us, that the divine attributes suggest that escape will be made available even to those in hell, see Andrei Buckareff and Allen Plug, “Escaping Hell: Divine Motivation and the Problem of Hell,” *Religious Studies* 4: 39–54.

29. I am not making a public claim here; I am not saying the uncommitted observer can discover empirically the truth of this statement. Nor do I defend my larger premise that these capacities depend for their excellence on our right relationship with God, and for their existence on a bare relationship with him, except to note that this is traditional.

30. By the mathematics of convergent series. James Cain defends the compatibility of suffering’s infinite duration and finite overall sum by means of the theory of relativity, but his suggestions are somewhat bizarre and are meant only as a possible scenario showing the noncontradiction of the two ideas. See James Cain, “On the Problem of Hell,” *Religious Studies* 38: 355–62. Cain dismisses the idea of a suffering of diminishing intensity on the grounds that it would eventually grow small enough to no longer be a barrier to overall happiness, which is presumably not allowed to the damned. He does not consider that the intensity of the suffering might diminish in a way that does not allow for its replacement by happiness, as for instance by a diminishment of our ability both to enjoy and to suffer.

We might still worry that the punishments of the damned are not proportionate to the evils done in this life. The traditional view of hell contains punishments of varied intensities, from mere loss of beatitude to serious torment, but if all are punished by a sort of progressive destruction, can we preserve this variegation? Indeed, wouldn't those who enter hell as worse sinners end up suffering less, since they are already closer to death, as it were, with capacities for suffering already diminished? But this is to assume a closer connection between torment and ontological loss than necessarily obtains. One's diminished capacities may put an upward limit on the amount of torment one can experience at any given time, but those with greater capacities for suffering need not actually suffer more. The traditional *poeni sensus*, the pains of sense, can be added or subtracted as justice requires from the *poeni damni*, the pains of loss shared by all in hell. It is entirely possible that the especially vicious are visited with an especially vicious destruction when God *destroys the destroyers of the earth*; and conversely, it may even be possible that some suffer their destruction without torment, as those in limbo are said to be separated from God without any "pains of sense." The difference I am suggesting lies not in the *poeni sensus* but in the *poeni damni*, expanding the latter beyond the loss of the beatific vision to include also the loss of being that separation from God is taken to entail. On this suggestion, our freedom extends farther than was traditionally supposed, and the decisive decision for or against God that results in heaven or hell includes within it a decision for or against our very existence. This destructive hell would be a harsher hell, for it robs us progressively of that existence which is a good, but its harshness stems from and is justified by a larger scope for our free choice.³¹

ANNIHILATIONISMS

So far I have tried to suggest a conception of hell attractive to those who want to hold onto the traditional doctrine of everlasting suffering and who give weight to traditional authorities like Gregory and Augustine and to traditional Christian philosophical positions like the privative view of evil. This conception is a sort of progressive annihilationism; but there are also Christians who deny aspects of the traditional position and defend a strict annihilationism, holding that the damned cease to exist altogether in the post-judgment state.

31. Eleonore Stump argues that some such compensatory justification is needed to justify the destruction of the damned precisely because destruction is an additional evil added to our punishment. "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Moral Theory, and the Love of God," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (1986): 181–98.

Here something must be said about time. I have spoken of hell as if it were a continuation of time, even citing Thomas on the point, but that may just be an approximation: hell is a mirror of heaven, in some respects duplicating and in some respects contradicting it, and its timepieces too are reverse images of their celestial counterparts. The similarity is implied in Matthew 25:46, where the eternity of the one is matched to the eternity of the other: "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."³² Of course, these cannot be the exact same sort of eternity, for the eternity of the life of the blessed is traditionally taken to come by participation in God's eternity, and not so the wicked: the eternity of their punishment must come instead from being cut off and unremembered by the Lord. This is why Thomas, in the passage quoted above, takes hell to be a sort of extended temporality, reading its eternality as everlastingness.

But this is not the only way to understand the progression of progressive annihilation. Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

In this context we are only concerned with the different kinds of timeless duration, which can become mutually opposed depending on whether there is a participation in, or a depriving of, divine eternity. The man who, in God, contemplates him is participating in a mode of being that "includes all time within it" (*aeternitas includit omne tempus*). If he is excluded from the contemplation of God and from a participation in the Divine Being, he is also excluded from this *includit* and so is restricted to the timelessness of his own being, deprived of all contact with God and with his fellow creatures. Such a restricted being is stripped of all those "dimensions" that characterize the living and that God possesses in an infinite degree: it is thus a dead *nunc stans*.³³

The annihilationist dissatisfied with the scholastic picture might take the eternity of hell in this way: not as eternity in its proper sense, of the single "now" in which God views all of creation; nor as the sort of everlastingness that suggests infinite future time, like ours in all but its endlessness; nor even as eternity in its participated sense, the *aeviternity* of the medievales, a mean between God and temporality; but rather as a sort of subternity, a falling away from God and the created time that is in God.³⁴ This is not straightforwardly describable, but if we must characterize it, we might say that it is a sort of frozen moment, the final moment, an activity without succession. It has neither before-and-after nor does it come to an

32. For more on the exegetical debate, see below.

33. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 306–7.

34. The medieval idea of *aeviternity* is motivated by the notion that time itself, as part of creation, is somehow elevated or drawn closer to God in the new creation. Sub-ternity is the inverse of that.

end. It is everlasting, if pictured temporally, or instantaneous, if pictured as the end of time, and the two held together by a chimera of gerund and progressive participle: for the damned, it is a *dying*, an eternal moment of death. They will be as Dante in the final, frozen ring of hell, who "did not die, and did not remain alive."³⁵

What this is not is pure nonexistence. The damned are dying; they have not died, nor are they yet to die. Theirs is the moment of death, falling timelessly from God's sustaining presence, as the old King James Version of the angelic oath is fulfilled: *that there should be time no longer (oti chronos ouketi estai)*. For the annihilationist to remain in continuity with historical orthodoxy, he need only affirm that there is no point at which the damned are no more, that, to adapt a phrase from the Arian controversies, there will be no time at which they are not. God does not judge, and kill (or let die), and contemplate the corpses; God judges the damned, and kills them, and contemplates their dying. This is where the strict annihilationist demurs, but she need not demur to remain true to her annihilationist instincts: she can affirm the death of the damned, so long as it is death everlasting. She need only say with the Psalmist that *though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction for ever*.

A progressive annihilation need not adopt this progressive participle approach; it can insist upon a consistent—the ultimate just like the immediate—temporality; it can take infernal eternity as infernal everlastingness instead of sub-ternity; it need not make von Balthasar's turn, but it can do so. How to understand the temporality of progression is left open by the mere claim that destruction is progressive. Successive loss of our capacities suggests how suffering might be both eternal and finite: a loss that is not successive and everlasting but sub-ternally instantaneous should *a fortiori* be able to accommodate the same combination. The first suggests an infinite addition of moments whose overall sum is finite; the second suggests a finitude, because a singularity, of moments. But I would suggest that the latter option is closer to what annihilationists want in their annihilation. There is at least this difference: to say that we are constantly dying in the sense of successively losing our capacities is to suggest that we never really die; to say that we are frozen in a moment of death suggests that we do die, but there is no moment beyond it. In that sense, the second death is more nearly like the first: not just the erosion of capacities, which after all happens in this life and is not properly called death, but some sort of passing from existence.³⁶

35. Inferno, Canto XXXIII.25 (Carlyle translation).

36. In the first death it is the body-soul union that passes from existence; for some, at least, this is sufficient to say that "I" pass from existence. Here it is body and soul and union that pass away, though again, unlike the first death and pace strict annihilationism, there is no moment of "having passed from existence."

This is to allude to the exegetical grounds of annihilationism, and here something must be said about Scripture, whose interpretation is at the center of the debate between annihilationists and traditionalists. It is beyond my purposes to survey and settle that exegetical debate, but three points might prove helpful in laying a biblical ground for the suggestions that have so far been advanced.

First, exegetical answers are constrained by the perceived philosophical options. The exegete takes it as her task to bring the figures and contradictions of Scripture to something nearer a univocal, propositional statement—there is a hell of such-and-such a character—and the sorts of propositions deemed sufficiently stable and pellucid for this task will depend on philosophical explication. Second, the New Testament, which is more explicit about the afterlife than the Old, uses language suggesting both destruction and eternality.³⁷ Sometimes the two are joined, as in 2 Thessalonians 1:9: “They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord.” And while some of this language can easily be read to imply a one-off act with eternal consequences, as with the term “eternal judgment”³⁸ or indeed “eternal destruction,” there are also cases where the instrument of punishment is itself described as eternal—eternal fire,³⁹ or the worm that does not die and the fire that is not quenched⁴⁰—and the eternal-consequences reading is rather more strained.

Third and consequently, the exegetical work tends to degenerate quickly into ambivalence over whether to prioritize eternality or destruction.⁴¹ As Joseph Leckie observed some years ago, “We become involved in a debate about the meaning of a few ambiguous words and of two or three pictorial expressions. We are constrained to balance very little evidence on the one side against very little on the other.”⁴² Because the philosophical options are seen as either eternal punishment on the one hand or destruction and subsequent nonexistence on the other, the exegete is torn between the biblical language that suggests the first and the biblical language that suggests the second, and the impossibility of

37. See, e.g., on the annihilationist side, E. Earle Ellis, *Christ and the Future in New Testament History* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 190–95, esp. 193; and on the traditionalist, Christopher W. Morgan, “Biblical Theology: Three Pictures of Hell,” *Hell under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 142–48.

38. Heb 6:2.

39. E.g., Jude 7.

40. Mark 9:48. Christ is there quoting Isa 66:24.

41. The exegetes are not always tentative, but their confidence flies in the face of Scripture’s ambivalence. For a comprehensive survey of the New Testament evidence that brings out this ambivalence, with a cautiously annihilationist conclusion, see David J. Powys, “Hell”: *A Hard Look at a Hard Question; The Fate of the Unrighteous in New Testament Thought* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998), esp. chs. 7–11.

42. *The World to Come and Final Destiny* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1922), 111.

reconciling the two in a straightforward way is grounded not in scriptural but in philosophical testimony.

But what if the philosophical barrier is illusory, the hallucinations of a vain desire for an afterlife that can be modeled neatly in our minds, and thence in our words? What if exegesis tempers its conclusions not with uncertainty but—what is not at all the same thing—with apophysis? It is not clear what sub-ternal existence actually means, nor how it might incorporate activity, frozen or otherwise, nor how a binary transition like dissolution, moving from a moment of existence to a moment of nonexistence, can itself be characterized as a moment to be frozen forever. Some of this confusion is just uncertainty, an invitation to further reflection based on a more substantial metaphysics of time, for instance. But some of our discomfort springs from the suspicion that these questions will never yield clear answers. This is precisely why Gregory's thought is a useful foundation, not just because it is persistently apophatic—before this darkling light there was his "luminous darkness"⁴³—but also because his eschatology reminds us in the West that the broader tradition equivocates over those future states that eye has not seen and ear has not heard. We should like to demand of the damned—as indeed of the blessed—that they be either within time or without, as those are conditions of which we can roughly conceive. But Gregory suggests another way: perhaps the best we can do is say that they are neither temporal nor eternal and construct safeguards against those who would incline to one affirmation or the other. Perhaps the way forward constructively is to conjoin two inadequate and contradictory conceptions, each the other's implicit denial, as with talk of activity without succession. For in so doing we produce a third conception, not describable in the way that the first two are, indeed only describable by something like this impossible conjunction, but emerging nonetheless. What I have tried to suggest here (and this is the second reason I find a specifically progressive annihilationism attractive) is that there is a kind of traditionalist position that can do justice to both sides of the scriptural ambivalence—not by speaking tentatively, which is caution, nor by refraining from speech, which is agnosticism, but by speaking in diverse and scarcely reconcilable ways, which is paradox pointing toward apophysis.

It is a traditionalist position: I do not pretend that it is the exact position of Augustine or the medievals, say; it is not what those who talked of perpetual suffering in the tradition *really meant*. But it accommodates traditional insights with less of the artful dodging of those, like Griffiths, who try to read a strict annihilationism into line with historical orthodoxy. Even if what has been suggested here is not the exact conception of someone like Thomas, it has certain commendable features that his position lacked—not

43. *Life of Moses*, 95 [par. 163].

least a harmony with those other aspects of orthodox thought that have generated the annihilationists' discontent. In that way, it is a challenge to the more traditional position, asking, why not annihilationism? In another, stronger way, it asks the balder annihilationists, why not traditionalism? What justifies continued dissent from the mass of Christians' interpretation of Scripture on this point?⁴⁴ Why not a death that descends away from God, or a dying beyond successive time? Or as Augustine puts it, if not in quite the way Augustine means it, why not a state in which we "will not be before or after death, but always in death; and thus never living, never dead, but endlessly dying?"⁴⁵ Finally, perhaps, the blackest mark against this view is that it does not make perfect sense; but its greatest recommendation is that, in following Scripture over the edge of human reason, it is not supposed to. As Augustine also says of hell, "It cannot be concluded that a thing has not been or shall not be because it cannot be reconciled to reason. . . . So those things we speak of are not impossible because inexplicable."⁴⁶

44. Some root their support for annihilation in the idea that God's majesty would be offended by the continued disobedience of those in hell (see, e.g., Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 154–55.) Interestingly, Thomas argues for the *preservation* of the damned on similar, and similarly vague, grounds: "Moreover, the annihilation of things does not pertain to the manifestation of grace, since rather the power and goodness of God are manifested by the preservation of things in being" (*ST* I. 104.4 corpus). Whether annihilation or preservation more befits God's nature is hard to determine: as Griffiths says, "Judgments about what does and what does not lack *convenientia* are notoriously difficult to assess" (Griffiths, "Self-Annihilation or Damnation?" 109). Brown and Walls argue that the extinction of the damned is not needed to protect divine majesty, see Brown and Walls, "Annihilationism," 61–63.

45. *City of God*, XIII.11.

46. *City of God*, XXI.5.