

# An Argument for Limbo

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**Abstract** In this paper I argue from a number of positions that are, while not uncontested, at least common among analytic philosophers of religion for the possibility, and indeed the plausibility, of a doctrine of limbo. The account of limbo that I advocate is substantially different than the element of Catholic speculative theology that goes by the same name. According to that doctrine, the *limbus infantium* is a place or state of perfect natural happiness for those who, prior to the age of reason, die without baptism. Given the possibility of ‘baptism by desire’, the need for limbo, as I shall develop it, is not based on whether or not an agent has received the sacrament of baptism. Instead limbo is, I argue, a place where individuals who have not had sufficient opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life will be given the opportunity to do so in the next life. Limbo, so understood, is a place which allows for the post-mortem healing and growth of individuals so that they are able to choose either for or against God in the way required for redemption in this life. On this view, limbo is not a place of ‘second-chances’, but rather a place of first-chances for those who were denied them in their terrestrial life.

**Keywords** Disability · Free will · Grace · Libertarianism · Limbo · Sin

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, philosophers have devoted significant analytic attention to issues eschatological. There has been, for example, careful reflection on the nature of the interim state, exploring how different views of human nature (e.g., hylomorphism or materialism) can account for the time between bodily death and physical

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resurrection. Furthermore, in addition to the work on universalism and annihilation (and thus the extent of eventual inclusion in hell, if any), there has also been considerable interesting work done on the nature of eschatological locations—hell, heaven, and even purgatory.

In the present paper, I want to explore a topic in this same general area of eschatological locations. More specifically, I want to argue from a number of positions that are, while not uncontested, at least common among analytic philosophers of religion for the possibility, and indeed the plausibility, of a doctrine of post-mortem limbo. The account of limbo that I advocate is substantially different than the familiar element of Catholic speculative theology that goes by the same name.<sup>1</sup> According to that doctrine, the *limbus infantium* is a place or state of perfect natural happiness for those who, prior to the age of reason, die without baptism. Some philosophers have expressed a concern that this sort of view is problematic because it treats such infants unjustly or cannot be squared with the unlimited extent of perfect divine love.<sup>2</sup> Given the possibility of ‘baptism by desire,’ the need for limbo, as I develop it in this paper, is not based on whether or not an agent has received the sacrament of baptism, but rather whether the agent has been able, in the present life, to choose to be united with God in the way that is required for redemption.

This argument, like all arguments, makes use of a number of background assumptions. I will not be arguing for those assumptions here, and have only argued for some of them in earlier work. While these assumptions are not as uncontroversial as one might like, I think that most of them are claims that many Christian philosophers agree with. Particularly since I am not ultimately trying to argue for the actuality—but rather just the possibility and perhaps probability, given these assumptions—of the existence of limbo, I hope that these assumptions are not too problematic for present purposes.

## 2 An Argument for the Existence of Limbo

The first assumption is certainly controversial among philosophers more generally, but is more widely accepted within philosophy of religion<sup>3</sup>: I will be assuming a libertarian understanding of free will.<sup>4</sup> Libertarianism is the conjunction of two

<sup>1</sup> For one of the few brief discussions of limbo in the contemporary philosophy of religion literature, see Griffiths (2008). The differences between this understanding of limbo and the account advocated below are numerous and fundamental.

<sup>2</sup> See Walls (2002) for this sort of criticism.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of why libertarianism is more common among philosophers of religion than among philosophers in general, see many of the chapters in Timpe and Speak (2016), but especially the introduction by the editors.

<sup>4</sup> I do not think that the argument to follow requires libertarianism for it to work. I suspect that the compatibilist could, if she wanted, avail herself of much of what is to follow, particularly if she thinks that determinism is false and that we do have free will. So for such a compatibilist, I think that she should be interesting in seeing if the following arguments work on the assumption of libertarianism. For if it does, it is an argumentative strategy that she too could avail herself of. In this way, the situation is akin to the compatibilist who takes advantage of or even develops a response to the luck objection. However, see footnote 9.

claims, one about the nature of free will and one about its existence. According to the first conjunct, free will [which I have elsewhere suggested should be understood as the control condition on moral responsibility; see Timpe (2012)] is incompatible with any kind of determination that originates external to the agent. This means that when an agent acts freely, she is not at that time subject to determinism of either the causal or theological sort. Furthermore, I take it that if incompatibilism is true, it is necessarily true, as I think that claims about what is (or is not) logically possible are themselves necessarily true (or false). The other conjunct of libertarianism is a contingent claim. According to this claim, human agents do, in fact, have free will and are morally responsible for at least some of their actions.<sup>5</sup> It follows from the conjunction of these two claims that both causal and theological versions of determinism are false; however, since the second conjunction is only contingently true, the falsity of determinism will also be contingent. Particularly given the falsity of theological determinism, it is not possible for God, so long as non-divine free and responsible agents exist, to unilaterally control all aspects of creation. I have developed such a view at greater length and applied it to a number of theological topics elsewhere. (Timpe 2013)

Second, I am here assuming that anyone separated from God via sin, either actual or original, is in need of redemption. And this predicament is true of all humans.<sup>6</sup> Some versions of the claim that all humans are in need of salvation are not particularly popular. Historically, this assumption has been tied with a particular view of original sin that we've inherited (pun intended) from Augustine, according to which everyone who suffers from original sin deserves eternal damnation. I am happy to accept the doctrine of original sin but, following on Michael C. Rea's work, I am here going to understand the doctrine of original sin in such a way that does not require the doctrine of original guilt. (Rea 2007)

I furthermore think it is the case that ultimate union with God in heaven requires the redeemed to be perfectly united with God.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as a person is sinful, then she is not fit for ultimate union with God. Only those persons who are fit for heaven will experience union with God in heaven for all eternity. In a pair of earlier papers with Tim Pawl, we argued that the nature of heaven itself, and not just the union with God therein, requires moral perfection for its inhabitants. (Pawl and Timpe 2009, 2013) So those persons who are not reconciled to God will not experience union with him in heaven insofar as they are not fit to given their present sinfulness. I

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<sup>5</sup> I do not want to assume here that all human agents have free will though I think that, if the argument that follows work, I will have gone some distance towards making that claim plausible by providing a way of responding to some of the difficult cases that might motivate the belief that only some, and not all, humans have free will.

<sup>6</sup> Save at least one, namely the human nature united to God in the incarnation. Depending on the exact nature of one's theological views, there may be two humans that do not suffer from sin, actual or original. For present purposes, I am bracketing these exceptions. In what follows, this restriction should be assumed wherever relevant.

<sup>7</sup> I do not think that reconciliation is limited to humans; ultimately, my eschatological hope is that all creation will be reconciled to God. But, following Aquinas, I think that grace perfects natures, rather than acts against it. So the reconciliation of other ontological kinds will depend on their natures. Insofar as a rock has neither rational faculties nor free will, it can be reconciled to God without the involvement of its (non-existent) will.

think that some of Eleonore Stump's work illustrates well the need for us to be perfectly united with God in a way that having a sinful nature would prohibit. Here is one of Stump's examples:

Suppose Anna is the mother of a feisty boy, Nathan, who loves soccer. Anna, on the other hand, loves flowers and has asked her son repeatedly not to play soccer on the side of the house where her flower beds are. But Nathan does play with his soccer ball near the flower beds, and the inevitable occurs; some of the flowers are trampled. Nathan, however, is so interested in his ball playing that he stops just long enough to run into the house and say, "Sorry, Mom, I trampled your flowers" before he returns to his game. What he has done then presents his mother with two problems, one regarding the flowers and the other regarding her son. She has lost some of her flowers, and it will take her some time, energy, and money to replace them. But her real problem is with her son. (Stump 2003: 433)

I think that this story illustrates that sin has at least two effects on humans. One effect of sin is what we might call 'the problem of what we've done.'<sup>8</sup> Because of this effect, we need to be made right with God—that is, we need to be justified—and forgiven for our sins. But a forgiven sinner is still that: a sinner—someone who is broken and marred and not as she ought to be. So in addition to the 'problem of what we have done' there is also another problem, what we might call 'the problem of what we have become.' Humans, whether as a result of actual sin or original sin, are not the kinds of humans that God intended them to be. This problem too requires reconciliation. Ultimate union with God will require rectifying both of these problems as part of our redemption. By redemption, I mean the entire process by which those of us who have been separated from God by sin are brought back into union with Him and brought to the fullness and perfection of our human natures. If I can artificially separate two things that it's probably best not to separate in theological contexts, our ultimate redemption with God require both justification and sanctification. Unless both of these happen, I take it that we are not fit for the perfect union with God that is at the heart of ultimate redemption.

From these (here, undefended) assumptions about the nature of free will and the requirements of ultimate union with God in heaven, it follows that God cannot ultimately and unilaterally reconcile a free agent to Himself without the cooperation of that individual's will. God cannot redeem a free agent against his or her will. Presumably, whatever reasons God has for giving us free will in the first place (especially given the earlier assumption of incompatibilism) will be among the reasons that God cannot accomplish the redemption of a sinful human without the involvement of her will. I do not mean to say here that we can will or choose to be united with God in the way required for ultimate redemption, for that would be our willing a good and entail a kind of Pelagianism. Rather, I am suggesting that in whatever way one sees the fallen human will cooperating with God with respect to

<sup>8</sup> In the case of infants who have not yet developed free will, and thus could not have exercised it sinfully, this particular effect of sin will not be relevant. However, assuming the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin, the other of the two problems will apply to all humans, and will be sufficient for needing to give an account of human redemption. More on this below.

their reconciliation while avoiding either Pelagianism or semi-Pelagianism, that is the relationship involved here. Elsewhere, I have tried to develop a libertarian view that avoids both Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism (Timpe 2007, 2015); and while it has come under criticism (Kittle 2015), I think that the exact details of my earlier account of grace are not needed to support the claim here that God cannot redeem an agent without the cooperation of that agent's will in some relevant way.

We can summarize the discussion so far as follows:

1. Libertarianism is true; free will exists, but is incompatible with the truth of causal or theological determinism.
2. All humans suffer from sin (actual or original).
3. If a human suffers from sin, then unless she is reconciled to God, she is not fit for ultimate union with God in heaven (i.e., 'redemption').
4. Only humans who are fit for heaven will experience union with God in heaven for all eternity.
5. Free, sinful agents cannot be determined to be reconciled to God and experience full redemption.

From this last claim it follows that if there are free human agents in the world, then God cannot ensure that they all experience union with God in heaven for all eternity (i.e., necessary universalism is false). In choosing to create free humans God is taking a risk.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it is also the case that God will do whatever possible to bring every individual to redemption. Given God's essential maximal goodness towards and love for his creation, God will do whatever possible to bring every individual to redemption. Here, it might be useful to draw from Jerry Walls' work on grace. In a passage regarding God's love and human salvation, Walls writes as follows:

If God loves in this fashion, it seems clear that he would be willing to offer his grace equally to all persons. That is, he would desire to distribute his grace fairly so that all persons receive a full opportunity to respond to it. That is, God would not give some persons many opportunities to repent and receive his grace while giving others only minimal opportunities, or even none at all. Indeed, it seems a God of perfect love would do everything he could, short of overriding freedom, to elicit a positive response from all persons.... Let us call such grace optimal grace. (Walls 2002: 67)

While I have some reservations regarding Walls' use of equality (namely, it is not clear to me how he is using 'equality' in the present passage. Equality of what?

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<sup>9</sup> If, contrary to my earlier assumption of the truth of libertarianism, compatibilism were true, then the above is too quick. For if God can determine how we use our free will then God can ensure that all human are rightly oriented toward Himself. So, on the assumption of compatibilism, God can ensure to avoid the damnation of any by determining how humans will. However, insofar as most compatibilists think that God doesn't ensure that we always use our will rightly—as the existence of moral evil demonstrates—then presumably there are goods served by the fails of universalism, goods which are incompatible with God's determining agents to always will correctly, they would have to hold that there are certain goods that God can't bring about if He also determines that we always will properly.

Number of opportunities to respond? Likelihood of responding?), I think that he does rightly capture something about the lengths to which God would go to bring about the redemption of His creation. God will do whatever possible, given His larger goals, to bring every individual to redemption.

This is a thesis which Walls elaborates as follows:

God will give such persons the full light of the gospel and the grace to achieve the complete transformation that salvation aims to achieve. What this means is that such persons will need to be informed about the incarnation, atonement, and so on. In other words, they will need to be evangelized. Those who respond to minimal or obscure truth would respond positively to the fullness of truth for the truth is a whole, and those who embrace partial truth would naturally embrace it when it is revealed to them more fully and clearly. (Walls 2002: 85f)<sup>10</sup>

In this passage, he is speaking primarily of those who received only ‘minimal light and opportunity to respond to that light during this life’; but if it applies to those, then surely it applies to those who do not have such an opportunity at all to respond in the present life.

Is it possible for a free but sinful human to die without having an opportunity to be reconciled to life in this world? I see no reason to think that it is impossible.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I think that Walls’ claim is too strong here. In virtue of what is it true that such individuals ‘*would respond*’ in a particular way? I think we can say that they might respond in this way. But given libertarianism (and the rejection of Molinism that Walls and I both share), I do not think that we can say that they would always respond positively to more light. So I am also assuming here the falsity of Molinism. But as Kate Rogers says in a recent paper, “I do not take it as a significant drawback of this project that I am forced to assume Molinism, which I think is necessarily false, is false.” (Rogers 2008: 128)

<sup>11</sup> Consider the following from William Lycan:

Compatibilism, not just about free will but generally, on any topic, is the default. For any modal claim to the effect that some statement is a necessary truth, I would say that the burden of proof is on the claim’s proponent. A theorist who maintains of something that is not obviously impossible that nonetheless that thing is impossible owes us an argument. And since entailment claims are claims of necessity and impossibility, the same applies to them. Anyone who insists that a sentence S1 entails another sentence S2 must defend that thesis if it is controversial. If I tell you that “Pigs have wings” entails “It snows every night in Chapel Hill,” you need not scramble to show how there might be a world in which the first was true but the second false; rather, you would rightly demand that I display the alleged modal connection. And of course the same goes for claims of impossibility. The point is underscored, I think, if we understand necessity as truth in all possible worlds. The proponent of a necessity, impossibility, entailment or incompatibility claim is saying that in no possible world whatever does it occur that so-and-so. That is a universal quantification. Given the richness and incredible variety of the pluriverse, such a statement cannot be accepted without argument save for the case of basic logical intuitions that virtually everyone shares. (Lycan 2003: 109)

Elsewhere I have endorsed this argument as a good methodological starting point, and that logical possibility should generally be assumed until an argument can be given to show logical impossibility [See Timpe (2012: 21f)]. This, then, gives us some initial (defeasible) reason for thinking it is possible that there are free but sinful humans who die prior to having an opportunity to be reconciled to life in this life.

Below, I will give some reasons that I think that there are such individuals.<sup>12</sup> Regarding those with little cognitive grasp of God or His nature, Walls writes that “for them to experience the full transformation and relationship with God that salvation requires that they come to understand who God is and what he did to save them.” (Walls 2002: 86) But even if it is only possible (and not actual) that there are such individuals, I think it follows from God’s goodness that He would offer an option for reconciliation with Him to those who were denied such an opportunity in the present life. And this, in a nutshell, is how I suggest we understand limbo. On this view, limbo is a place where individuals who have not had sufficient opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life will be given the opportunity to do so post-mortem. And this is what I shall refer to as the ‘Minimal Limbo Conclusion’:

*Minimum Limbo Conclusion (MLC):*

If there are cases where individuals have not had an opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life, God will give those individuals an opportunity to do so in the next life.

I suggest then that we should understand limbo as the kind of place where the opportunity for reconciliation to God is extended, as an expression of divine love, for those who had no such opportunity prior to their death. In those cases where individuals have not had sufficient opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life, God will give them such an opportunity to do so in the next. On this view, limbo is not primarily a place of ‘second-chances’, but rather a place of first-chances for those who were denied them in their terrestrial life.<sup>13</sup>

### 3 Limbo and Infants

At this point, the perceptive reader will no doubt see a connection between my suggestion regarding limbo and the traditional doctrine of the *limbus infantium*, according to which limbo is a place or state of perfect natural happiness for those who, prior to the age of reason, die without baptism. If a human dies in infancy,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> How wide is this category? Does it include the mentally ill? The cognitively disabled? The developmentally disabled? The emotionally disabled? Bob Hartman (in person) wants to know. On my view, it will include all those who, through no fault of their own, can no opportunity to become reconciled to God in the present life and are not able—due to age, development, disability or the like—to make such a choice at the time of their death. In another series of papers, I am currently exploring the ways that various kinds of disability might impact and impair moral agency. For an overview of this branch of research, see Timpe (forthcoming) Luke Henderson (in person) has asked if geographic factors can make one unable to be reconciled to God? Perhaps; I honestly don’t know. Hartman also wants to know if the cut-off for ‘sufficient’ can be vague? If so, God goes to the first non-metaphysically vague sufficient opportunity and gives them at least that much—(in person).

<sup>13</sup> I am not saying that there can be only one opportunity for reconciliation with God in limbo, but there can be no *second*-chances if there is not a *first*-chance. And I am primarily interested here in limbo as giving at least a first-chance.

<sup>14</sup> Or as a young child, or in utero.... In these addition cases, the same conditions would hold. In what follows, this extension of my argument beyond infants proper should be understood wherever applicable.

then it seems as if she would not have had an opportunity to chose to cooperate with God in her reconciliation. So there seems to be a connection between the more traditional doctrine of limbo and what I am suggesting in (MLC).

The two doctrines, however, are importantly different. According to the more traditional understanding of limbo, it is a place not for those who were denied a chance at reconciliation with God in the present life, but for those who died before they developed free and responsible agency and who did not receive the sacrament of baptism. An example of this view can be seen in the following passage from Katherin Rogers' work on Anselm:

Baptized infants who die before reaching the age of reason are saved through grace alone without any input from their own wills. On the troubling issue of infants who die before being baptized Anselm follows Augustine in the view that they are damned. He is clearly unhappy with this conclusion. (Rogers 2008: 135)

I do not blame Anselm for being unhappy with this conclusion. Granted, Anselm does try and make this conclusion a little less unpalatable:

Moreover he argues that it is reasonable to suppose that the unbaptized infancy, who has not had the chance to commit any personal sins, will suffer far less than the person who dies having chosen to sin on his own. None the less he thinks the logic of the situation is inevitable; original sin is damning, and ubiquitous and can only be overcome by the work of Christ, though grace which, in the case of infants, means baptism. (Rogers 2008: 135f)<sup>15</sup>

Rogers wants to distance herself from such an Anselmian view, and instead seems to hold that all infants who die prior to committing actual sin are saved by God's grace whether or not they have been baptized.

As is hopefully clear from the above discussion, the (MLC) does not involve the same understanding of limbo that has been central in the historical reflection on the topic and which is illustrated by Anselm (but in no way limited to just him). My understanding of limbo as summarized in the (MLC) differs from the traditional view in at least two important ways.

First, limbo as I understand it would be open to all infants (indeed, all who die without an opportunity for reconciliation with God in the present life), whether or not they have been baptized. While Christian theology often allows for 'baptism by desire', thereby holding that ordinary sacramental baptism is not strictly speaking necessary, it is implausible to hold that infants are able to form the relevant desire needed. But even this is an avoidable criterion for exclusion from heaven given that

<sup>15</sup> Rogers has pointed out to me in conversation that Anselm does differentiate how non-baptized infants will be punished in hell from how those who commit actual sin will be punished: "Clearly there is a great difference between Adam's sin and infants' sin. For Adam sinned of his own will, but his progeny sin by the natural necessity which his own personal will has merited. Although no one thinks that equal punishment follows unequal sins, nevertheless the condemnation of personal and of original sin is alike in that no one is admitted to the Kingdom of God (for which man was made) except by means of the death of Christ, without which the debt for Adam's sin is not paid. Yet, not all individuals deserve to be tormented in Hell in equal degree." (Anselm 2000: 457)

the Catholic Church accepts ‘baptism by desire’. *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized*, a Vatican document resulting from an International Theological Commission, expressly says that “there are theological and liturgical reasons to hope that infants who die without baptism may be saved and brought into eternal happiness, even if there is not an explicit teaching on this question found in Revelation” (*The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized*, preamble). As with that document, my proposal is rooted in the conviction that “God wills to save all people” (*The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized*, para. 9). For those, like infants, who “do not yet have the use of reason, conscience and freedom [and thus] cannot decide for themselves” (*The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized*, paragraph 2). In allowing for such a possibility, I am neither discounting the necessity of baptism for salvation. But if the view that I have offered is correct, then the *limbus infantium* would have been needed, since limbo on my proposal will given all individuals an opportunity to choose in a way that would warrant either heaven or hell.<sup>16</sup>

The second, and bigger difference, is that the doctrine of limbo I am offering here would not necessarily hold that all infants who die baptized avoid it. So far as I can tell there is nothing in *The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized* that would rule out the possibly of limbo as a place offering individuals a first chance at reconciliation with God. But Catholic theology does seem to require that no baptized infant would be in need of limbo as I have developed it here, since the sacrament of baptism is sufficient for justification, and so I must admit that my proposal runs around of Catholic doctrine on this point.<sup>17</sup> In Catholic theology, all baptized infants are redeemed via their baptism. It may also be that all infants are redeemed:

As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus’ tenderness toward children which caused him to say: ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,’ allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. All the more urgent is

<sup>16</sup> Individuals who, in limbo, chose to reconcile with God may still need purgatory to make sure they are sanctified not just justified, and therefore fit for heaven. The process of sanctification, as I understand it, involves the will (see Timpe 2013, particularly Section 6.4).

<sup>17</sup> Mike Rota, Tim Pawl, and Turner Nevitt have all raised a version of this worry (in person). My view also departs from Catholic theology insofar as limbo on my proposal runs afoul of parts of the Catechism:

Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ. The New Testament speaks of judgment primarily in its aspect of the final encounter with Christ in his second coming, but also repeatedly affirms that each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith. The parable of the poor man Lazarus and the words of Christ on the cross to the good thief, as well as other New Testament texts speak of a final destiny of the soul—a destiny which can be different for some and for others. Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification or immediately,—or immediate and everlasting damnation. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1021 and 1022)

the Church's call not to prevent little children coming to Christ through the gift of holy Baptism. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 1261)

If one thinks that those who die as infants can be saved without the cooperation of their will, then I think one should hope that all who die as infants are in fact saved. But if one thinks that individuals can be redeemed apart from the involvement of their wills, this seems to undermine the importance of free will and the various goods for which it is necessary.<sup>18</sup> If God can redeem some—the baptized who die as infants—apart from the involvement of their will, I can think of no reason that He could not redeem all apart from the involvement of their wills. Insofar as redemption is such a great good, I do not see why He would not redeem all given his essential omni-benevolence.<sup>19</sup> But we have reason, I think, to believe that universalism is false.<sup>20</sup> I think that the considerations regarding free will that many Christian philosophers have, including a libertarian understanding of free will as well as a necessary role for the individual's exercise of free will regarding salvation, give good reason for us to favor—at least as an aspect of speculative theology—the doctrine of limbo I have suggested as a plausible doctrine:

The little child is scarcely capable of supplying the fully free and responsible personal act which would constitute a substitution for sacramental Baptism; such a fully free and responsible act is rooted in a judgment of reason and cannot be properly achieved before the human person has reached a sufficient or appropriate use of reason.... Therefore, besides the theory of Limbo (which remains a possible theological opinion), there can be other ways to integrate and safeguard the principles of the faith grounded in Scripture. (*The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptised*, paragraph 29)

As Jerry Walls has noticed in a similar context, “If one believes salvation requires our free cooperation with God's gracious initiative, there is no more reason to believe that all who die in infancy are saved than there is to believe all who grow to adulthood in this life will be saved.” (Walls 2002: 89) It is such a consideration that will be used to motivate extending the account of limbo I developed in the previous section to all who die in infancy.

According to Walls, it is more typical among Protestants to think, along with Rogers mentioned above, that all who die in infancy are saved, regardless of whether they were baptized or not. Walls thinks that such a view is held in “a broad consensus.” (Walls 2002: 88) But he also gives reason to doubt this view, reason which I think can help motivate the view of limbo I offer here:

<sup>18</sup> This, in my view, puts pressure on, among other things, various versions of the free will defense.

<sup>19</sup> This, of course, could simply be a failure of my theological imagination or due to my lack of familiarity with Catholic sacramental theology.

<sup>20</sup> See Timpe 2013, chapter 5 for why I think this. In particular, I'm inclined to think that necessarily universalism, the view that it is necessarily the case that every created free agent will in fact be redeemed, is false. I'm more open to the possibility of a contingent universalism, whereas as a matter of fact all created free agents will be redeemed. In what follows, I'm going to ignore even contingent universalism. If it turns out that, as a matter of contingent fact, all are redeemed without limbo playing a role in the salvation of any individual, then the account of limbo I give will be an unrealized possibility, but a possibility nonetheless.

Our view about infant salvation should be consistent with our account of the nature and ground of salvation generally. So what follows about infant salvation from the account of salvation I have defended? If salvation is a thoroughgoing moral and spiritual transformation that requires our free cooperation, what does this imply for those who die before such transformation can be achieved? As [Benjamin] Warfield saw it, '[T]here is but one logical outlet for any system of doctrine which suspects the determination of who are to be saved upon any action of man's own will... and that lies in the extension of 'the day of grace' for such into the other world.' Moreover, he points out that there is no guarantee on this view that all who die as infants will be saved on this account. If some freely reject Christ in this life, then it is possible, if not likely, that some would reject him in the next life as well. Warfield is correct on both counts. Since infants are not capable of moral or spiritual choices, if salvation requires such, then infants must have the opportunity after death to make such choices. Moreover, infants must grow up and mature in order to achieve the character and transformation that is characteristic of a perfected relationship with God. (Walls 2002: 88)

Regarding those with little cognitive grasp of God or His nature, Walls writes that "for them to experience the full transformation and relationship with God that salvation requires that they come to understand who God is and what he did to save them." (Walls 2002: 86)

Infants (and stillborns) who die without receiving the sacrament of baptism are, so far as I understand it, the reason why the *limbus infantium* was postulated as a part of speculative theology. As it is understood by Dante and Aquinas, limbo is a place or state of perfect natural happiness for those who, prior to the age of reason, die without baptism. One reason that it is not a particularly popular doctrine is that it seems to treat those who are taken to be among its inhabitants are those who did not seem to be given a proper chance to cooperate with God for their redemption in the present life.<sup>21</sup> Some develop this opposition as an affront against justice. But even if God is doing nothing unjust in depriving such individuals of the opportunity for full reconciliation with Him, I think there are reasons to believe that the God of optimal grace would give those individuals an opportunity post-mortem since they didn't have one pre-mortem. And such an opportunity is exactly what the present account of limbo would afford to individuals.

#### 4 The Need for a Bodily Limbo

In this final section, I want to develop the preceding account of limbo a bit more fully to explore the role of physicality and physical health and healing therein given the Christian commitment to the resurrection of the body, particularly for those who

<sup>21</sup> Ryan Byerly has suggested that there will likely be a problem of divine hiddenness in limbo: just how obvious can God's existence and demands upon humans be in limbo if humans are to remain free? I think that this is a good question, but it is not clear to me that the problem of limbic hiddenness will be in need of a different solution than is the problem of earthly hiddenness.

reject substance dualist accounts of the human person.<sup>22</sup> As I am envisioning it, limbo would be appropriate either for those who were not afforded an opportunity for reconciliation with God in the present life either because they died as infants or because of a disability. I will address each in turn.

Consider, first, those for whom limbo is appropriate given that they simply died prior to having an opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life. Depending on the age at which they died, they might not be at a developmental stage in the life of a human where such a choice is possible. In these cases, it could be that they are allowed to develop as normally as resurrection bodies allow and then be extended the opportunity for union with God once their rational faculties are sufficiently developed.

Cases involving disability may be a bit more complicated, for mere opportunity for developmental growth and maturation will likely be insufficient for the individual in question to be able to have an opportunity for reconciliation with God. Healing of the individual's body will also be required, though the exact kind of healing will depend both on the kind of disability in question and its etiology.<sup>23</sup> In what follows, I will only consider cognitive disability, though I think other roughly similar kinds of considerations will hold for other forms of disability which also impact moral agency.<sup>24</sup>

Cognitive disability is also sometimes referred to as intellectual disability, though not everyone uses these terms interchangeably, or in the same way as others use them. For instance, 'intellectual impairment' is the preferred locution of much of the medical and psychological communities, as evidenced by the definition manual of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), which is closely followed by the DSM. In the introduction to *their Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Licia Carlson and Eva Feder Kittay write that "We've chosen the term 'cognitive disability,' under which we include conditions like autism, dementia, Alzheimer's, and [what has historically been called] mental retardation, rather than 'intellectual disability.' The former is broader. Also, some forms of cognitive disability do not imply diminished intellectual capacity (e.g., autism)." (Carlson and Kittay 2010: 1, note 1; see also Carlson 2010) Even the definition used by the AAIDD includes more than just strict intellectual functioning: "a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills" (American Association on Mental Retardation: 1). I will follow Carlson and Kittay and speak of cognitive disability; I intend my use of the

<sup>22</sup> There may be other forms of dualism—such as emergent dualism—that are relevantly different than substance dualism of the Cartesian sort. I do not intend the considerations below to be directed at these other forms.

<sup>23</sup> It should also be pointed out at this point that the kind of healing I'm suggesting is probably inconsistent with Lockean conceptions of personal identity. Thanks to both Luke Henderson and Andrew Bailey for making this clear.

<sup>24</sup> See Timpe (forthcoming) for a treatment of the ways that different kinds of disability can impact and impair moral agency.

term to cover the wider category of disability, though it should be noted that some of the sources on which I draw focus primarily on the more restricted class.

Psychologists and neuroscientists have done a lot of work on cognitive disability, in part because it “ranks as first among chronic conditions that limit full participation in society.” (Harris 2006: 79) But the issue has received less attention from philosophers, though that is presently changing. Carlson and Kittay, for instance, raise a number of philosophical issues pertaining to cognitive disability:

In posing philosophical questions about cognitive disability, philosophers focus on numerous ethical problems. Some address the moral states of individuals with cognitive disabilities, and ask: Are those with cognitive disability due the same respect and justice due to those who have no significant impairments? Are the grounds of our moral obligation different when a human being may lack certain cognitive faculties that are often understood as the basis for moral personhood? Are those with significant cognitive impairment moral persons? What sort of moral responsibility is it appropriate to expect of people with different degrees and sorts of cognitive disabilities? Are the distinctions between mild and severe impairment morally relevant? Are the people with cognitive disabilities, especially those labeled as ‘mentally retarded’ distinct, morally speaking, from nonhuman persons? (Carlson and Kittay Carlson and Kittay 2010: 1)

It is primarily the questions regarding moral responsibility (i.e., What sort of moral responsibility is it appropriate to expect of people with different degrees and sorts of cognitive disabilities? Are the distinctions between mild and severe impairment morally relevant?) that are most relevant to limbo, insofar as an individual would appear to require moral agency in order to have the relevant sort of choice regarding reconciliation toward God. Though I cannot defend the claim at present, I think it is only in the most severe cases where cognitive disability undermines responsible agency; others will have impaired agency, but still be responsible agents. Given how wide the range of intellectual disability—from those whose disability is so severe that it is not clear they their behavior is mediated by concepts at all, to those who clearly have a grasp on moral concepts—it should be expected that the impact of cognitive disability on responsible agency also varies greatly in degree. So not all cognitively impaired agents will need the opportunity that limbo offers.

The most direct way that cognitive disability can impact moral agency is via the epistemic condition on moral responsibility. An agent’s (non-culpable) ignorance regarding what morality demands, for instance would exculpate the agent. Richard Swinburne (2009) argues, for instance, that morality requires two types of knowledge: knowledge of the general moral rules or principles (e.g., that feeding the hungry is morally good), and knowledge of contingent non-moral facts about the occasion so that one knows how to properly apply those general moral rules (e.g., that this particular person is hungry).

Even if one thinks that morally responsible agency does not require this knowledge, there is surely a lesser connection between one’s conception of the moral good and one’s responsible exercise of agency. As Carlson and Kittay write, “There is a close relationship between theoretical frame-works within which we

conceive of agency, and the way in which we then articulate conceptions of the good ... in relation to the individual with cognitive disabilities.”<sup>25</sup> Severe forms of cognitive impairment might undermine the agent’s ability to understand the good in whatever specific way one thinks is required for moral agency. Such individuals, for example, might not be able to understand the consequences of their actions and moderate them in light of moral considerations. Furthermore, some individuals with moderate (as opposed to severe or profound) intellectual disability are not able to engage in abstract thought or apply abstract principles (including moral principles) across situations. (Evans 1983; Castles 1996)

Children with cognitive disabilities progress and mature in their moral development at a different rate, and often in a different way, than do non-disabled children. (Harris 2010: 64) Depending on the nature and etiology of the cognitive disability, they may follow the same development stages in terms of moral problem solving as do non-disabled children. But many individuals with cognitive disabilities are not just ‘developmentally delayed.’ They also have a slower speed of processing information insofar as they are less cognitively efficient, which will impair their ability to respond in time-sensitive and speedily unfolding moral situations.

For severe cognitive disability caused by traumatic brain injury (TBI), the healing needed in order for an agent in limbo to have an opportunity to respond to God would involve a healing of the TBI. Given the connection of agency with the body, we might think that this gives some support for thinking that limbo would happen post-resurrection. In other cases, more than just healing and growth is required. Consider, for instance, individuals with 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome. This involves a deletion on the short (p) arm of chromosome 2. The emerging phenotype of individuals with 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome include a number of physical affects (e.g., microcephaly, vision problems, kidney abnormalities); speech impairments; gross and fine motor control issues; and cognitive and developmental disabilities. (*2p15p16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome*: 4 and 7) Agents with 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome typically also have problems with self-control and executive function insofar as agential planning is also hampered by moderate to severe cognitive impairment. At present, it’s not clear that many individuals with 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome have the cognitive and volitional capacities required for moral agency, particular regarding the kind of choice involved in reconciliation with God.

For such an individual, limbo would need to involved the overcoming of the ways the disability might undermine her moral agency. Given that 2p15-16.1 Microdeletion Syndrome is caused by a genetic mutation that results in missing genetic material, the individual’s genetic code would likely need to be completed or repaired. But the mere addition of the missing part of chromosome 2 would not be sufficient, given that during the developmental process the loss of that material will have had dramatic effects on the agent. So a kind of radical healing that involves the

<sup>25</sup> Carlson and Kittay 2010: 14; see also Francis and Silvers 2010, 251: “Forming ideas of the good functions both to formulate the aims one should pursue and to stimulate their realization.” Elsewhere, I have developed an account of free agency with affords a central role to the agent’s conception of the good. (see Timpe 2013, particularly Chapter 2)

agents basic genetic structure would likely be required. What exactly would such a radical healing look like? Would it, for example, involve a healing of all ailments of this present life? Would it involve everything that is involved in the bodily resurrection, such that those in limbo have a perfected body? These are, in my view, good questions that deserve to be explored in further work on what such a view of limbo might look like. But they cannot be explored at greater length here.

## 5 Conclusion

I have argued from plausible premises in the philosophy of religion to the conclusion that if there are cases where individuals have not had an opportunity to be reconciled to God in the present life, then God will give those individuals an opportunity to do so in the next life. I have also extended this account to allow for a way that infants and those who are disabled and who, as a result, have lacked an opportunity to reconcile with God in the present life to have such an opportunity post-mortem. For those who have died prior to developing the capacities that would be needed to cooperate with God in their reconciliation, limbo could function as a place wherein they develop those needed capacities and are then offered the opportunity to use them. This account of limbo is an ‘interim state’ since, like purgatory, it will ultimately be empty.<sup>26</sup> I certainly don’t think that any of the considerations I have canvassed here necessitate or entail a doctrine of limbo for Christians (or even only for Christians who endorse a libertarian view of free will), given that some of the premises used in the argument for this conclusion are contentious. Nevertheless, I do think that they give us good reason for taking seriously such a doctrine as a possible implication of other beliefs that many of us do endorse. At the very least, I think it is worthy of further investigation than Christian philosophers have given it so far.

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<sup>26</sup> But unlike purgatory, one could go from limbo to hell. That is, just as in this life, an individual would not be guaranteed to use her will to realign herself with God in the way needed.

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