

# THE PLEASURE OF LIFE AND THE DESIRE FOR NON-EXISTENCE: SOME MEDIEVAL THEORIES

Tobias Hoffmann

**Abstract:** Are there subjective or objective conditions under which human life is not worth living? Or does human life itself contain the conditions that make it worth living? To find answers to these questions, this paper explores Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Richard of Mediavilla, and John Duns Scotus, who discuss whether the damned in hell can, should, and do prefer non-existence over their existence in pain and moral evil. In light of Aristotle's teaching that there is a certain pleasure inherent to life itself, I shall argue that even a life that is in important respects painful and unpleasant is still worth living.

Are there subjective or objective conditions under which human life is not worth living? Or does human life itself contain the conditions that make it worth living? In this paper, I will explore some little-known texts by medieval theologians for answers to these questions.<sup>1</sup> The authors I discuss all admit that there is a point at which non-existence becomes preferable to existence, both objectively, from a third-person perspective ("it would be better for that individual not to exist"), and subjectively, from a first-person perspective ("I would rather not exist"). My particular interest lies in what their positions imply about the value of human life, and also in the presuppositions upon which these positions are founded. More specifically, some of the central questions that will be raised are these: By what scale can one measure the value of human existence? Would non-existence be better than existence when someone's existence is in some sense detrimental to God? What is the subjective value of a life lived under distress?

There are several contexts in which the medievals discuss the willingness to die, including not only suicide but also self-sacrificing acts of bravery or martyrdom. I will focus here, however, on a more radical scenario than the readiness merely to die. The theologians under consideration in this paper did not consider death to be the end, but only the entry into an

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to commonly used abbreviations, my paper contains the following ones: a. for articulus; *add.* for addit; arg. for argumentum; CCSL for *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*; d. for distinctio; *dub.* for dubium; in corp. for in corpore articuli vel quaestionis; *In Sent.* for Commentary to Peter Lombard's *Sentences*; n. for numerus; *om.* for omisit; q. for quaestio; qc. for quaestiuncula; un. for unica.

afterlife. I will therefore discuss the more extreme case of the desire for complete non-existence, specifically as those who live in a permanent state of extreme discomfort and moral evil would experience it. Such a condition is, according to Christian teaching, suffered by the damned in hell. In this connection, certain medieval authors raise the question of whether the damned can, should, and do prefer non-existence over their existence in pain and moral evil.<sup>2</sup>

If one could give a fairly accurate explanation of why non-existence becomes preferable at a certain definite point, then this would help us understand why, before that point is reached, we would still have reason to prefer a somewhat miserable life over non-existence. On that basis I shall argue that even a life that is in important respects painful and unpleasant is still worth living.

The context of medieval discussions of the desire for non-existence is clearly theological. Yet most of the actual considerations within this theological context are philosophical in nature. In my paper, I will take the perspective of a philosopher who accepts theism—whether merely as a working hypothesis, as a theological premise, or as a rationally acquired conviction. Even for a non-theist, philosophical considerations that are based on theological premises can be just as fruitful as ordinary thought experiments in entirely non-theological discourse.

In the first section, I will present Bonaventure's and Aquinas's explanations of how the desire for non-being is psychologically possible. In the next two sections, I will investigate medieval answers to the question of whether the damned *should* desire non-existence. This question centers on the objective value of a life lived in a condition of existential or moral misery. We will consider the positions developed by Richard of Mediavilla (who enters the stage a few years after Bonaventure's and Aquinas's death in 1274) and by Duns Scotus (in lectures he gave at the beginning of the fourteenth century). Richard puts the non-existence and the existence of the damned on a scale of values together with such values as the love and honor of God; for Duns Scotus, by contrast, the criterion for whether non-existence is to be preferred is no longer a scale of objective values, but whatever is pleasing to God. In the last section, I will present how Richard and Scotus see the damned individuals' own subjective preference for non-existence, and I will relate this to the Aristotelian claim that life has a pleasure that is intrinsic to it.

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<sup>2</sup> While the standard context for the question of whether non-being is preferable to being in misery is the situation of the damned in the afterlife, Henry of Ghent discusses this question from the perspective of the present life. He offers detailed analyses of the seemingly opposed positions of Augustine and Aristotle and attempts to reconcile them. See Henry of Ghent (1979–), *Quodlibet* I q. 20, 5:157–70. For a detailed discussion, see Porro 2011.

## 1 The Possibility of Desiring Non-Existence: Bonaventure and Aquinas

In discussing the desire for complete non-existence, our first task is to see how this desire is even psychologically possible. In order to be something desirable, it must somehow have the character of some good, for, according to an axiom generally accepted by the medievals, nothing can be desired that does not appear under some description as good.<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure and Aquinas, whose discussions of the damned's desire for non-existence are in any event not very elaborate, dedicate most of their attention to the question of the very possibility of this desire. A consideration by Augustine opposes this hypothesis. It seems psychologically impossible to desire something that is nothing, as he writes:

Look how absurdly and inadequately it is said that "I would rather not be than be miserable." In fact, someone who says "I prefer this to that" chooses something. Non-being, however, is not something at all, but nothing. Therefore you cannot in any way correctly choose it when that which you choose does not exist. (Augustine [1970], *De libero arbitrio* 3.8.22.76, CCSL 29:288)<sup>4</sup>

The position Augustine himself takes is that even those who are miserable still prefer to exist, because even miserable existence is a greater good than non-existence.<sup>5</sup>

Bonaventure deals with Augustine's problem by denying that the preference for non-being consists in a desire, i.e., in the pursuit of something. He explains this preference merely as an avoidance. His explanation is brief and not very clear:

That this preference [*praelectio*] presupposes a choice [*electio*] . . . is true of preferences of the desire type, but not of preferences of the avoidance type. (Bonaventure [1882–1902], *In Sent.* IV d. 50 pars 1 a. 1 q. 2 ad 2, 4:1038b–1039a)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bonaventure (1882–1902), *In Sent.* IV d. 50 pars 1 a. 1 q. 2 arg. 2, 4:1038a; Thomas Aquinas (1852–1873), *In Sent.* IV d. 50 q. 2 a. 1 qc. 3 arg. 2, 7/2:1252b.

<sup>4</sup> "Nam illud uide quam absurde atque inconuenienter dicatur: 'Mallet non esse quam miser esse.' Qui enim dicit: 'Mallet hoc quam illud', eligit aliquid. Non esse autem non est aliquid sed nihil et ideo nullo pacto potes recte eligere, quando quod eligas non est." Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Latin are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine (1970), *De libero arbitrio* 3.7.20.70, CCSL 29:287: "Nam si hoc bene consideraueris, uidebis in tantum te esse miserum in quantum non propinquas ei quod summe est, in tantum autem putare melius esse ut quisque non sit quam ut miser sit in quantum non uides quod summe est, et ideo tamen esse te uelle quoniam ab illo es qui summe est."

<sup>6</sup> "Ad illud quod obiicitur, quod praelectio supponit electionem; dicendum, quod verum est de illa quae est per modum desiderii, non de ea quae est per modum fugae."

This solution does not seem quite satisfactory, because, *ex hypothesi*, the damned not only want to *avoid* their miserable existence, they also *desire* non-existence. This is in fact the language Bonaventure himself used a few lines above:

I believe that, if one were given the option, it would be more to be desired [*magis appetendum esset*] not to be at all than to be eternally tormented. (I am speaking of the desire to avoid what is disagreeable [*incommodum*].) For my mind deems this to be more bearable, just as decapitation is more bearable than slow burning. (Ibid., in corp., p. 1038b)<sup>7</sup>

Aquinas's solution to the question of the damned's preference is more sophisticated. *Per se*, non-being cannot be desired because as such it has no aspect under which it is good, but is rather the pure privation of the good. *Per accidens* (incidentally), however, there is an aspect under which non-being is good, namely insofar as it ends misery. In this way, the damned can prefer non-being.<sup>8</sup>

Aquinas offers fundamentally the same solution in his explanation of how Jesus could have said of Judas that it would have been good for him not to have been born (Mt 26:24). It is worth looking at his argument in full:

“Non-being” can be taken in two ways: either as such, or in comparison with something else. I say that “as such” it is not a possible object of choice [*eligibile*], as Augustine says, but it is a possible object of choice when it is taken in comparison with something else, as Jerome says. For it is not anything in reality [*in natura*], but it is taken as something according to the apprehension of the mind, like “not sitting.” But choice is made on the basis of what is apprehended. Therefore “lacking evil” is taken as a good. (Thomas Aquinas [1951], *Super Matthaeum*,

<sup>7</sup> “. . . credo, quod magis appetendum esset, si poneretur in optione, omnino non esse quam aeternaliter torqueri, loquor de appetitu, qui refugit incommodum. Hoc enim iudicat mens mea magis portabile, sicut decollationem magis quam diurnam ignis adustionem.”

<sup>8</sup> Aquinas, *In Sent.* IV d. 50 q. 2 a. 1 qc. 3 in corp., 7/2:1254a: “Ad tertiam quaestionem dicendum, quod non esse dupliciter potest considerari. Uno modo secundum se: et sic nullo modo potest esse appetibile, cum non habeat aliquam rationem boni, sed sit pura boni privatio. Alio modo potest considerari in quantum est ablativum poenalis vel miserae vitae; et sic non esse accipit rationem boni. Carere enim malo est quoddam bonum, ut dicit Philosophus in 5 Ethic.; et per hunc modum melius est damnatis non esse quam miseros esse. Unde Matth. 26, 24, dicitur: *Bonum erat ei, si natus non fuisset homo ille*; et Hier. 20, super illud, *Maledicta dies in qua natus sum* etc. dicit Glossa, Hieronymi, ibi: *Melius est non esse quam male esse*: Et secundum hoc damnati possunt praeligere non esse, secundum deliberativam rationem.” See also *ibid.*, ad 1, ad 2, and ad 3.

*Reportatio Leodegarii Bissuntini* cap. 26 lectio 2, ed. R. Cai, 334b)<sup>9</sup>

Aquinas's point is that, psychologically, what directly shapes a choice is not something that exists in reality, but something that is a consideration in the mind. Negations can be the object of thought and therefore the object of choice, although negations do not exist as such in reality but only in the mind. "Being free from evil"—even if it implies non-existence—still is something that can be grasped by the mind and that is related somehow to reality, just like the idea of "not sitting" is not a pure fiction but something that bespeaks a state in reality. Thus it can be the object of choice, and it can be seen as something good, even if only incidentally, insofar as it entails the lack of suffering.

Aquinas does not seem to employ the term "choice" in the Aristotelian sense here, for strictly speaking the damned cannot *choose* their annihilation, for the simple reason that they cannot bring it about. They can wish for it, however; in medieval terminology, they can have "velleity" for their annihilation. Velleity is a wish for something one is, or deems oneself, unable to attain. This notion is familiar to the medievals from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle argues that we cannot choose immortality, only wish for it (*EN* 3.2.1111b19–23). The damned are in the opposite situation: they would like to be mortal rather than immortal, but since it is impossible for them, they can only wish for it.

## 2 Non-Existence on a Scale of Values: Richard of Mediavilla

While the previous considerations concerned the bare psychological possibility of the desire for non-existence, I will now turn to discussions of the moral dimension of that desire. Now the question is no longer "Can the damned desire non-existence?" but "Should they desire it?"

The first author I'm aware of who dedicates an entire *quaestio* to the issue of whether the damned should desire not to exist is Richard of Mediavilla.<sup>10</sup> He distinguishes two aspects of the question. The damned desire non-being

<sup>9</sup> ". . . dicendum quod non esse dupliciter potest accipi: vel secundum se, vel per comparisonem ad aliud. Secundum se dico quod non est eligibile, ut dicit Augustinus, sed per comparisonem ad aliud est eligibile, ut dicit Hieronymus. Quia hoc non est aliquid in natura, sed secundum apprehensionem animae accipitur ut aliquid, ut non sedere. Sed electio accipitur ab eo quod est apprehensum: ideo carere malo accipitur ut bonum."

<sup>10</sup> Richard of Mediavilla (1591), *In Sent.* IV d. 50 a. 4 q. 2, 4:704b–705b. Elsewhere Richard has an even more extensive treatment of the questions of whether the damned should and whether they actually do desire non-existence; see Richard of Mediavilla (2011), *Quaestiones disputatae* q. 30, ed. Alain Boureau, 288–320, where he asks these questions specifically about the damned angels. For the most part, however, the arguments there are the same as the ones in his *Sentences Commentary* which are examined in this paper.—Richard's discussion is clearly dependent upon John Pecham, who in 1270 asked whether the damned should desire non-existence in the context of the broader question of whether they actually do desire non-existence; see John Pecham (1989), *Quodlibet* I q. 14, ed. Girard J. Etzkorn, 34–37.

in order to avoid experiencing evil. For him, everything depends on the reason why they want to escape their existence, for there are two kinds of evil that are attached to their condition. One is the evil of fault (*malum culpae*), the other is the evil of punishment (*malum poenae*). According to Richard, because of their sinful existence, the damned *should* prefer their non-being as a means to stopping their offense of God. Yet they should not desire their non-being simply in order to avoid their just punishment.

Basically, Richard assesses the subjective and objective reasonableness of the desire by asking what is gained and what is lost by their non-existence. More specifically, he on the one hand weighs what is bad about their non-existence, namely the lack of existence itself, against the greater evil of their permanent sin; on the other hand, he weighs what is good about their non-existence, namely the lack of their suffering, against the greater goods of the ontological value of their existence and the attainment of justice.

## 2.1 Avoidance of the Evil of Fault

For the sake of clarity, I will now reconstruct Richard's arguments in a more orderly form than that in which he himself presents them. I will pay special attention to his premises and his arguments for them, for his premises express the value judgments that are interesting for our purposes. Here is Richard's two-step argumentation that the damned should desire non-existence in order to avoid the evil of fault:

### Value argument (negative<sup>11</sup>):

- (VN1) Sin is more to be avoided than non-existence.<sup>12</sup>
- (VN1') Sin is worse than non-existence [equivalent to (VN1)].<sup>13</sup>
- (VN2) The damned cannot exist without being in a condition of permanent sin.<sup>14</sup>
- ∴ (VN3) It is better that the damned not exist rather than that they exist in sin.

### Obligation argument:

- (O1) Of two things, one is more obliged to avoid what is worse.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I call it "negative" because it concludes that non-existence is better. Below there is a value argument that I call positive because it concludes that existence is better; see note 24.

<sup>12</sup> *In Sent.* IV d. 50 a. 4 q. 2, 4:705a: ". . . magis deberent damnati fugere esse in peccato quam fugere non esse. . . ." In the quotations from Richard, I occasionally changed the punctuation and the spelling.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 705a: ". . . peius est peccatum quam non esse. . . ."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 705a: ". . . in damnatis est malum culpae in quo sunt obstinati. . . ."; *ibid.*: ". . . esse eorum non possit esse sine peccato. . . ."

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 705a: ". . . quaelibet voluntas debet fugere quod peius est. . . ." This premise is also implicit in the thesis mentioned a few lines earlier, that one is more obliged to avoid what injures someone whom one must love more, i.e., someone who is a greater good; see *ibid.*, 705a: ". . . secundum rectum iudicium rationis, magis debet voluntas fugere illud quod est contra rem quam magis tenetur diligere quam illud quod est contra rem quam non tantum

(O1') Of two things, one should desire the one that is better [equivalent to (O1)].<sup>16</sup>

(O2) For the damned, non-existence is better than existence [(VN3)].

∴ (O3) The damned ought to desire their non-existence.<sup>17</sup>

Richard takes for granted the major premise of the obligation argument. For him, as for Aquinas and arguably for the tradition of ancient philosophy, not only is what is better more desirable, but there is also an obligation to pursue what is better.<sup>18</sup> (As we will see, Duns Scotus will not share this idea, which is why he develops a quite different solution.) The minor premise of the obligation argument (O2) is the conclusion of the value argument (VN3). So in order to see whether the obligation argument is sound, we have to look at the premises of the value argument.

The minor premise of the value argument, that the damned cannot exist without being in a state of sin (VN2), is assumed. This is a theological premise that all medieval theologians accepted. The damned are obstinate in their sin; they cannot repent and hence they cannot earn the divine forgiveness that would liberate them from their sinful condition.<sup>19</sup> Since their existence is accompanied by sinfulness, they can avoid sin only by not existing.

The weight of Richard's demonstration lies on the major premise of the value argument in its two equivalent formulations, namely that sin is more to be avoided than non-existence (VN1), and that sin is worse than non-existence (VN1'). We will consider Richard's argument for (VN1) below. He has a separate argument for (VN1').<sup>20</sup> His argument for (VN1) proceeds in two steps:

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tenetur diligere; sed certum est quod quilibet magis tenetur diligere Deum . . . quia est bonum infinitum."

<sup>16</sup> The equivalence of pursuing good and avoiding evil is explicitly assumed by Richard. It could be argued for as follows: one has to desire what is good—avoiding what is worse is good—one has to avoid evil; one has to avoid what is bad—not desiring what is better is bad—one has to desire what is better.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 705a: “. . . ad hoc habendo aspectum deberent velle non esse.” Ibid.: “. . . deberent velle non esse, ut non essent in peccato.”

<sup>18</sup> See Owens 1996.

<sup>19</sup> *In Sent.* II d. 7 a. 2 qq. 1–2, 2:92b–95b.

<sup>20</sup> Richard's argument for (VN1'), which we may call the “Due good” (*bonum debitum*) argument, is this:

(DG1) The lack of a good that is due to someone is worse than the lack of a good that is not due to someone.

(DG2) Sin is the lack of a good that is due to someone; non-existence is the lack of a good that is not due to someone.

∴ (DG3) Sin is worse than non-existence [= (VN1')].

Richard assumes the first half of the minor premise (DG2), i.e., that sin is a lack of a good that is due to someone. (This was a generally accepted understanding of sin.) He argues for the second half of the minor premise, that non-existence is not the lack of a good that is due to someone, by noting that before creation there was non-existence without its being evil, i.e.,

**Lovability argument:**

- (L1) An infinite good has to be loved more than a finite good.
- (L2) God is an infinite good; one's self is a finite good.
- ∴ (L3) God has to be loved more than oneself.<sup>21</sup>

Richard implicitly treats the conclusion (L3), that God is to be loved more than oneself, as equivalent to the idea that what is against God is more to be avoided than what is against oneself, a creature. This is now the major premise (A1) of the argument that demonstrates the major premise of the value argument (VN1).

**Avoidance argument:**

- (A1) What is against God must be avoided more than what is against oneself [equivalent to (L3)].
- (A2) Sin is against God, while non-existence is against oneself.
- ∴ (A3) Sin must be avoided more than non-existence [= (VN1)].<sup>22</sup>

**2.2 Avoidance of the Evil of Punishment**

So far we have seen Richard's arguments that, on account of their permanently sinful condition, the damned should desire not to exist so as to avoid the evil of fault. Essentially, Richard asked whether the evil of the offense to God outweighs the evil of a creature's non-existence, or—in positive terms—whether the good of the non-offense to God outweighs the good of a creature's existence.

Now let us look at desiring non-existence so as to avoid the evil of punishment. Richard gives two arguments that the damned should not desire it for this motive. In the first, he compares the good of a creature's existence with the good of the joy (*gaudium*) implied in their non-existence. This argument speaks to the ontological value of existence as such.

**Value argument (positive<sup>23</sup>):**

- (VP1) No one should want to forsake what is nobler for the sake of what is less noble.

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without existence's being due to any creature. In his own words: "Praeterea, peior est carentia boni debiti quam boni non debiti, quia prima carentia habet rationem mali, secunda non; sed peccatum est carentia boni debiti, non esse non est carentia boni debiti, quia tunc fuisset malum ante creationem mundi; ergo peius est peccatum quam non esse" (*In Sent.* IV d. 50 a. 4 q. 2, 4:705a).

<sup>21</sup> Richard of Mediavilla, *In Sent.* IV d. 50 a. 4 q. 2, 4:705a: ". . . quilibet magis tenetur diligere Deum quam seipsum, intantum quod si voluntas posset diligere dilectionis actu infinito intensive, deberet diligere Deum infinite, etiam quantum ad intensionem, quia est bonum infinitum; creatura autem diligi non debet a seipsa nisi finite, quia finitum bonum est. . . ."

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* (contiguous with the previous quotation): ". . . cum ergo peccatum sit contra Deum, et non esse contra esse proprium, magis deberent damnati fugere esse in peccato quam fugere non esse. . . ."

<sup>23</sup> See above, note 11.

(VP2) Existence is nobler than the joy implied in escaping punishment.

∴ (VP3) One must not desire non-existence simply in order to avoid punishment.<sup>24</sup>

Richard argues for the minor premise (VP2) with the axiom that existence is the most noble kind of participation in God, and is therefore a greater good than any other good, such as the joy which is obtained by avoiding punishment.<sup>25</sup>

In the second argument, which is not very developed and yet quite important, Richard argues that because justice is a good and non-existence is not, the justice that is obtained by the punishment of the damned is to be preferred to non-existence.

**Justice argument:**

(J1) No one should want that which is not good in order to avoid that in which there is some good.

(J2) In justice there is some good; in non-existence there is not.

∴ (J3) One must not desire non-existence in order to escape justice.<sup>26</sup>

Richard denies here what he had earlier admitted, namely, that the non-existence of the damned is in a sense a good, at least in the relative sense that it puts an end to their sin. To amend the argument, it could be recast as an argument directly comparing the value of justice with the value of avoiding punishment. The major premise (J1) could be replaced by the major premise of the previous argument (VP1). J2 and J3 could be slightly amended:

**Revised justice argument:**

(J1') No one should want to forsake what is nobler for the sake of what is less noble. [= (VP1)]

(J2') Justice is a greater good than avoiding punishment.

∴ (J3') One must not desire the avoidance of punishment.

And therefore, one must not desire non-existence as a means for the avoidance of punishment.

Richard's views of how the values of the existence and the non-existence of the damned compare to the values of other things that they imply can be summarized as follows: (1) The evil of the non-existence of the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 705a–b: “Habendo tamen aspectum ad eorum poenam quae iusta est et a Deo est: non deberent velle non esse ad hoc ut poenam non haberent; nobilior enim participatio Dei est esse quam gaudium . . . , sed nullus debet velle perdere nobiliorem participationem ad vitandum incommodum, quo est contra minus nobiliorem. Cum ergo non esse sit contra esse, et poena contra gaudium, nullus debet velle non esse propter amotionem poenae tantum.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 705b: “Praeterea, non esse nullum est bonum; in poena autem est aliquod bonum, inquantum est iusta; sed nullus debet velle illud quod non est bonum ad vitandum illud in quo est aliquod bonum; ergo damnati non debent velle non esse ad fugiendum poenam tantum.”

damned is smaller than the evil of their sin if they exist; hence from this perspective, their non-existence is better. This corresponds to premise (VN1'). From the following two perspectives, their non-existence is worse, that is, their existence is better: (2) The good of the joy of avoiding suffering is smaller than the good of existence, which is a participation in God. This corresponds to premise (VP2). (3) The good of avoiding suffering is smaller than the good of the justice obtained by punishment. This corresponds to premise (VJ2').

What Richard does not tell us is what the damned should desire, *all things considered*. On account of their evil of fault, the non-existence of the damned is better than their existence, but on account of their evil of punishment, their existence is better than their non-existence. The evil of their fault outweighs the evil of their non-existence, but the good of their existence and the good of justice outweigh the relative good of their non-existence.<sup>27</sup> But are these two perspectives commensurable? How does the evil of their fault (on account of which their non-existence is better) compare to the good of justice (on account of which their existence is better)? Richard does not tell us. Scotus, whom we will consider next, expresses these sorts of reservations about Richard's view.

### 3 Non-Existence and Divine Command Ethics: Duns Scotus

Duns Scotus takes the structure of his investigation from Richard. But his solution departs significantly from Richard's, not only because he finds Richard's arguments wanting, but also because he starts from significantly different assumptions concerning the foundation of morality.<sup>28</sup>

I will present Scotus's critique of Richard and then his answers to the questions of whether the damned should desire non-existence in order to avoid the evil of either their fault or their punishment.

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<sup>27</sup> The relative good of their non-existence is the "joy" (*gaudium*) they "experience" by evading punishment (of which Richard speaks on p. 705b) as well as the fact that the damned no longer offend God (of which Richard speaks on p. 705a).

<sup>28</sup> The only text that has come down to us where Duns Scotus discusses the desirability of the non-existence of the damned is the report of his Parisian lectures (*Reportatio Parisiensis*) from the years 1302–1304, on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. The issue is discussed in book IV, distinction 50, questions 1–2.

Duns Scotus's *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV exists in two versions, commonly marked by the letters A and B. For the A-version I collated three manuscripts: Oxford, Lincoln College 6 (= L); Rome, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Borgh. 317 (= S) and Vat. Lat. 883 Rolling (= I). For the B-version I collated a manuscript, Oxford, Merton College 63 (= M), with an early printed edition ([John Duns Scotus 1517–1518](#)) (= X).

The two versions probably go back to lecture notes by two different students or groups of students. At least for the portion of the text under consideration, the B-version is of higher quality than the A-version. Therefore I will for the most part cite the B-version and refer to the A-version only when useful.

### 3.1 Refutation of Richard's Arguments

The gist of Scotus's complaints about Richard's argument concerns his overall approach. Richard measures the benefits of the existence vs. the non-existence of the damned by a scale of values that Scotus reveals to be inconsistently observed. According to Scotus, any of Richard's specific reasons that he applies exclusively to either the evil of fault or the evil of punishment can be applied across the board. For example, the ontological good of their existence and the moral good of their just punishment would be lost no matter what the motivation behind their annihilation was, i.e., no matter whether they chose annihilation in order to avoid the evil of their fault or the evil of their punishment.<sup>29</sup>

But even if we do want to use a scale of values to decide the issue, Richard's scale is not nuanced enough, in Scotus's opinion. For example, we cannot rank-order "what is against God" and "what is against myself" if the detriment to God and the detriment to myself are not commensurable:

Also the first of these three arguments [i.e., the avoidance argument] is unsound. For when it is said that that must be avoided more which is more opposed to the thing that one is obliged to love more, this is true if it is equally opposed to one thing and to the other. Otherwise, this does not follow, for I am more obliged to love myself than my neighbor, and yet I must strive less vigorously to avoid hurting my foot—although this is opposed to myself—than the death of my neighbor—although this is opposed to the thing I am less obliged to love. Accordingly, I say: if the fault were opposed to God to the same degree that pure non-being is opposed to myself, such that my fault would annihilate God, then I would have to will more not to be, than that there be fault in me. But actually, fault is only opposed to the precept of God, because nothing evil happens to God from the fact that I do not keep a precept, and I can greatly love someone whose precepts I do not want to observe. (*Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 109v, X fol. 84vb)<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Duns Scotus, *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 109v; X fol. 84va: "Sed istae rationes non concludunt, quia videntur aequaliter concludere quod non posset appeti non esse ad fugiendum miseriam culpae secundum rectam rationem, quia sicut prius, culpa non adimit naturam non plus quam poena, et non esse adimit simpliciter." Ibid., M fol. 109v, X fol. 84vb: "Dico tamen quod istae rationes non concludunt conclusionem, quia ut superius dictum est, rationes primae positionis duae aequaliter concludunt de miseria culpae et de <om. X> miseria poenae, et de iustitia sicut de quacumque alia perfectione."

<sup>30</sup> "Nec concludit prima istarum trium rationum, quia cum dicitur quod illud est magis <om. X> fugiendum quod <quando M> magis est <magis est] om. X> contra rem quam plus tenetur <teneor X> diligere, verum est, si est eodem modo contra unam rem sicut <et X> contra aliam. Aliter enim non oportet, quia <quod X> plus teneor diligere me quam proximum,

Furthermore, weighing the evil of the offense given to God against the good of a sinner's existence would apply just as much to any sinner here on earth as it does to the damned. So by the same token, God should annihilate any sinner here on earth, rather than permitting them to sin.<sup>31</sup> What is more, simply weighing the one good against the other would imply that I would be obliged to prefer that I cease to exist rather than that someone else should commit a mortal sin. Scotus denies that there is such an obligation, although—as we will see shortly—he admits that one may, out of love for God rather than out of obligation, prefer one's own non-existence to someone else's committing a mortal sin.<sup>32</sup> The point is, then, that simply applying a scale of values cannot cut through to the question of whether someone in a situation of permanent fault and suffering should desire not to be rather than to remain in this situation. We will see now whether Scotus can offer a viable alternative.

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et tamen minus debeo fugere laesionem pedis mei, quamquam sit contra me, quam mortem proximi, quamquam sit contra rem quam minus teneor diligere. Sic dico: si culpa aequaliter esset contra Deum sicut <sic M> non esse simpliciter contra me, ita quod culpa annihilaret <adimpleret X> Deum, magis deberem velle non esse quam culpam mihi inesse. Nunc autem culpa non est nisi contra praeceptum Dei, quia nihil mali sibi accidit ex hoc quod non servo praeceptum, et possum diligere multum aliquem cuius praecepta nolo custodire.” Cf. the conclusion of the parallel passage in *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV A d. 50 q. 1–2, L fol. 176v, I fol. 334rb, S fol. 136va: “Sed qui peccat non ita facit contra Deum quod velit Deum non esse, sed tantum facit contra praeceptum Dei.”—In his *Disputed Questions*, Richard anticipates an objection like Scotus's (doing little harm to one who is to be loved more may be less bad than doing much harm to someone who is to be loved less). But Richard argues that since God is infinite and a creature only finite, doing the smallest harm to God will be worse than doing the greatest harm to a creature. See *Quaestiones disputatae* q. 30, ed. Alain Boureau, 294.

<sup>31</sup> *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 110r, X fol. 85ra: “Praeter hoc, quod plus pondero, si magis esset contra Deum culpa in isto quam non esse huius simpliciter, ergo magis deberet Deus annihilare istum quam permittere eum peccare – vel non esse suum –, quia magis deberet Deus nolle quod <quando M> est contra se quam quod <quando M> est contra istum; ergo magis deberet nolle istum peccare, quod <quando M> est contra se, et prius ipsum annihilare, quod <quando M> est contra istum, quam permittere istum esse in culpa, quod <quando M> est contra seipsum, sicut patet de calore et frigore <calore X>: calor magis corrumpit frigus quod <quando M> est contra se quam permittat <permittit X> ipsum esse, licet corruptio eius esset contra naturam frigoris.”

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, M fol. 110r, X fol. 85ra: “Item, cum quodcumque peccatum mortale sit aequaliter contra Deum, ergo si magis deberet eligere id quod est minus contra Deum, et culpa, secundum istos, in quocumque sit est magis contra Deum quam non esse meum, ergo secundum rectam rationem teneor magis velle me non esse simpliciter quam quod alius peccet mortaliter.” Cf. *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV A d. 50 q. 1–2, L fol. 176v–177r, I fol. 334rb, S fol. 136va: “Praeterea, cum quodcumque peccatum mortale cuiusdam parte aequale existens aequè inhonoret Deum, secundum hoc quilibet potius tenetur non esse quam eligat <quam eligat> et eligere IS> quod <om. I> quicumque mortaliter peccaret, quod <om. SI> non credo.”—For the preference of one's own non-existence to someone else's committing a sin, see below, note 38.

### 3.2 Scotus on Wishing for Non-Existence in Order to Avoid the Evil of Fault

According to Scotus, and contrary to Richard, one should not desire non-existence even on account of the evil of fault. For Scotus, to desire not to exist is to hate oneself, and hatred of oneself is the second greatest sin after hatred of God.

#### Lesser sin argument:

- (LS1) A lesser sin has to be avoided less than a greater sin.
- (LS2) Apart from hatred of God, any sin is a lesser sin than wanting not to be.
- ∴ (LS3) One ought to avoid any other sin—apart from hatred of God—less than wanting not to be.<sup>33</sup>

Scotus proves the minor premise (LS2) with an argument about self-love:

#### Self-love argument:

- (SL1) After the love of God, to love oneself is the highest obligation.
- (SL1') After hatred for God, hatred for oneself is the most severe sin [equivalent to (SL1')].
- (SL2) Wanting to be the cause of one's non-being is to hate oneself.
- ∴ (SL3) Apart from hatred of God, no other sin is more to be avoided than wanting not to be [= (LS2)].<sup>34</sup>

We may ask, of course, whether the minor premise of the self-love argument (SL2) is plausible. It seems rather question-begging: whether wanting not to be is hatred of self or love of self depends precisely on whether in a given situation our non-existence is better for us. Scotus himself admits, as we shall see, that the damned in fact desire non-existence as a better state than existence under pain. A further problem in Scotus's argument is that the damned exist in permanent hatred of God, which could only end by their non-existence. Hence it would seem that by Scotus's own premise (SL1'), the obligation to end this state of hatred of God is higher than the obligation to self-love.

<sup>33</sup> *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 110r, X fol. 85rb: “. . . sicut minus peccatum est minus fugiendum, sic culpa alia quam odire Deum est minus fugienda quam hoc modo non esse.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, M fol. 110r, X fol. 85rb: “Et si sic quaeritur, dico quod sicut primo tenetur diligere Deum, et gravissimum peccatum est odire Deum, sic tenetur diligere se <om. X> post <post M> Deum, et gravissimum peccatum post odire Deum est <post odire Deum est> est odire Deum et X> sic odire se <om. X> quod vellet esse causa sui non esse. Et sic manifestum est quod magis fugiendum esset velle non esse quam quodcumque aliud peccatum mortale post primum. . . .” Cf. *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV A d. 50 q. 1–2, L fol. 177r, I fol. 334va, S fol. 136va: “Esse summum maxime teneor diligere esse meum, sic prius odium esse Dei, maxime teneor vitare et fugere odium esse proprii. Ergo odiendo esse ipsum et nolendum ipsum facere non esse, mortaliter peccarem.”

While the argument we have just seen concludes to Scotus's own satisfaction that—contrary to Richard's view—one ought not desire non-existence in order to avoid the evil of fault, Scotus discusses another situation in which wanting non-existence to avoid the evil of fault is not sinful, but rather warranted. If it pleases God to annihilate me, then I ought to allow God to annihilate me, for I should want to avoid my non-existence less than I should want to avoid committing a mortal sin (and—as is implicit in what Scotus says—not wanting to allow God to annihilate me if he wanted to do so would be a mortal sin). As this last argument shows and as will become clearer in what follows, for Scotus what is morally better depends on God's preferences, which are expressed in his precepts. Unlike Richard, Scotus does not measure what is morally better by scales of value that are independent from God's will.

**Precept argument:**

- (P1) Where a precept has not been revoked and where no other precept stands in its way, everyone is more obliged to observe the precept than to refrain from observing it because of something else which is not ordered by a precept.
- (P2) There is no precept of God concerning being, while there is a precept that has not been revoked according to which one must not commit a mortal sin.
- ∴ (P3) Hence I have to desire to be annihilated more than to commit a mortal sin.<sup>35</sup>

The minor premise (P2) might seem surprising, since there is the precept of the Decalogue that one should not kill, i.e., the fifth commandment. But in the case where God wants me to desire my non-existence, he revokes the fifth commandment. He does not revoke, however, the precept that no one must commit a sin. The point is that if God revokes the fifth commandment, then killing or wanting to kill is not a sin, while disobeying God remains a

<sup>35</sup> *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 110r–v, X fol. 85rb: “Ergo ubi non revocatur praeceptum nec obviat <obiciat M> praeceptum, fortius tenetur quilibet in quolibet casu magis servare praeceptum quam non servare propter aliquid quod <aliquid quod> aliud quando M> non est praeceptum; ergo debet magis velle permissive se annihilari a Deo si Deo placeat quam velle transgredi aliquod praeceptum; sed nullum praeceptum Dei est ad esse, nec quod Deus non annihilat me, et praeceptum est non revocatum ‘non committere culpam’; ergo minus debeo non velle annihilationem meam a Deo quam committere peccatum mortale.” Cf. *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV A d. 50 q. 1–2, L fol. 177r, I fol. 334va, S fol. 136va–vb: “Sed non volendo se ad esse annihilare, non transgreditur praeceptum divinum, sed inclinationem naturalem. Sed sic est quia quandoque alia esse occurrunt secundum divisas naturas. Semper illud quod est secundum naturam superiorem est eligendum et faciendum. Sic in proposito est, quia praeceptum Dei est secundum regulam superiorem, quia secundum voluntatem divinam quod est de non committendo culpam. Sed nolle non esse est <esse est> est esse IS> secundum inclinationem naturalem quae est inferior; ergo potius debet <non add. IS> velle annihilari quam culpam et peccatum committere <esse IS>.”

sin. As a matter of fact, as Scotus notes a few lines after presenting the “precept argument,” God did revoke the prohibition of killing when he ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.<sup>36</sup> The desire to accommodate various biblically recorded dispensations from the Decalogue—God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son (Gen 22:1–2), commanding the Israelites to steal from the Egyptians (Ex 11:2–3; 12:35–36), and ordering Hosea to commit fornication (Hos 1:2)—is in fact one of Scotus’s motivations for making the fourth to tenth commandments of the Decalogue depend on a decree of God’s will rather than on the goods inherent to created things.<sup>37</sup>

As Scotus continues, one may even freely agree to undergo annihilation so that someone else other than oneself will not commit a mortal sin, or so that God may not be dishonored. This proceeds from the greatest love of God, and hence it is no sin.<sup>38</sup> Scotus adduces Aristotle as a witness in favor of such noble wishes. For according to Aristotle, the brave will risk their lives rather than do something base.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.3 Scotus on Wishing for Non-Existence in Order to Avoid the Evil of Punishment

Turning to the desire for non-existence in order to avoid the evil of punishment, Scotus is in agreement with Richard that such a desire is unethical.

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<sup>36</sup> *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 110v, X fol. 85rb: “Neque occidere hominem est peccatum de genere actus, sicut patet de Abraham qui voluit immolasse Isaac ad praeceptum Domini, sed dum praeceptum stat et fortius non revocat, nihil potest esse magis volubile quod <quando M> non est contra praeceptum quam quod <quando M> est contra praeceptum.”

<sup>37</sup> John Duns Scotus (1950–), *Ordinatio* III, d. 37 q. un. n. 4, 10:272; n. 18, 10:280.

<sup>38</sup> *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 110v, X fol. 85rb: “Item, velle sic sustinere annihilationem a Deo ne quis peccet mortaliter est velle hoc ne <non X> ipse inhonoret Deum <inhonoret Deum] in honore Domini X>; sed tale velle procedit ex maxima dilectione Dei; ergo non potest in hoc aliquis <in hoc aliquis] aliquis in hoc X> peccare, cum non possit Deus nimis diligi.” The A-version does not mention any extension to the preference of non-existence over someone else’s offending God; see *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV A d. 50 q. 1–2, L fol. 177r, I fol. 334va, S fol. 136vb: “Praeterea, velle isto modo se non esse ne scilicet sit <om. IS> peccatum <quis add. IS> est moraliter <est moraliter] moraliter est IS> velle; sed non velle esse ne inhonoret Deum procedit ex maxima dilectione Dei, quia in tantum vult <iteratur I> servare praeceptum Dei quod potius vult non esse quam praeceptum Dei transgredi <quam praeceptum Dei transgredi] om. S>. Sed actus procedens ex maxima dilectione Dei est actus consonus rationi rectae; ergo etc.”

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, M fol. 110v, X fol. 85rb: “Item, III *Ethicorum* <cap.> 29 <et 9 M> vult Philosophus quod propter bonum actum virtutis debet quis exponere se actui, ubi potest contingere quod alius eum occidat. Non enim posuit Philosophus quod aliquis propter virtutem deberet <debet X> occidere se, tantum hoc <om. M> abhorruit sicut nos, sed quod prius quam committatur <committat M> turpe, praeeligendum est facere actum virtuosum ubi periculum mortis imminet et forte mors sequitur, quam diu vivere vitiose; ergo cum ipse non sperabat de futura vita, multo fortius deberent scilicet <M dub., om. X> christiani permittere se non esse a Deo quam offendere Deum.” Scotus refers to *EN* 3.8.1116b19–23.

**Just punishment argument:**

- (JP1) No one may, in virtue of right reason, desire non-existence in order to avoid what is good and just.
- (JP2) The evil of punishment is good, simply speaking (*simpliciter bonum*), and just.
- ∴ (JP3) No one may desire non-existence in order to avoid punishment.<sup>40</sup>

Scotus offers a second argument, which appears less plausible from a modern perspective, but which in the Middle Ages would have appeared uncontroversial. It makes reference to the natural inclination to life. According to the shared view of Scotus and his contemporaries, natural inclinations, also called “natural appetites,” are put into the natures of things by their Creator and hence ultimately express his intention.

**Natural inclination argument:**

- (NI1) No one can rightly desire by his free appetite (*appetitu libero*) something contrary to a natural inclination or natural appetite when that natural appetite is in conformity to the divine will.
- (NI2) The natural inclination is for being, and the divine will wants the person to be.
- ∴ (NI3) No one can rightly desire non-being.<sup>41</sup>

The minor premise (NI2) raises the issue of whether there is not also a natural inclination to avoid pain. Scotus is aware of this objection, but does not adequately address it.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., M fol. 110r, X fol. 85ra: “Quia nullus recta ratione debet appetere non esse <neque add. X> ad fugiendum bonum et iustum; sed <sicut X> malum poenae illi cui infligitur est iustum <sed malum . . . iustum] *iteratur* M> et simpliciter bonum, quia numquam infligitur nisi existenti in culpa, et iustum est <om. X> et bonum quod tali infligatur; ergo ad illud vitandum nullus potest recta ratione appetere non esse.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., M fol. 110r, X fol. 85ra: “Item, nullus potest recte eligere appetitu libero contra inclinationem naturalem et appetitum quando est consonum voluntati divinae (quia aliquando potest appetere quis recta ratione contra inclinationem naturalem, quando illa non est consona voluntati divinae); sed inclinatio naturalis est <om. X> ad esse, quia natura appetit quod melius est, 2° *De generatione* <GC 2.10.336b27–29>, et in omnibus melius est esse quam non esse, et 2° *De anima* <An. 2.4.415b1–2> ‘omnia agunt propter esse et esse appetunt’; ergo secundum inclinationem naturalem magis appetit quis esse quam fugere poenam, et iste appetitus est consonus voluntati divinae.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., M fol. 110r, X fol. 85ra (contiguous with the previous text): “Unde licet appetitus naturalis non sit ad poenam nec ad esse quatenus est sub poena, est tamen ad esse simpliciter, et voluntas divina vult esse huius cum poena; ergo secundum rectam rationem, cum quilibet hoc possit scire, magis tenetur conformare voluntatem suam voluntati divinae quam appetere non esse.”

## 4 The Preference for Non-Existence and the Pleasure of Life

What we have not considered yet is whether the damned themselves actually desire their non-existence. This question gives us insight into what our authors consider to be subjectively preferable, apart from any objective values or moral obligations. I will present Richard's and Scotus's views, both of which hold that the damned do in fact prefer non-existence. Then I will open a new perspective by asking whether there might not be good subjective reason to desire existence on account of Aristotle's thesis that life itself is pleasant.

### 4.1 Richard and Scotus on the Factual Desire for Non-Existence

The question of whether the damned do in fact desire non-existence does not receive much attention from the authors considered here. Richard briefly explains that non-existence can only be desired incidentally. What the damned desire as such is being freed from punishment. So they desire non-existence incidentally, not as a state valued in itself, but as a means to being freed from punishment.<sup>43</sup>

Scotus begins his discussion of the actual preference of the damned with the observation that their desire is completely independent from their objective obligations, because the damned do not have any desire for what is just in its own right (*appetitus iusti*), but only for self-advantage (*appetitus* or *affectio commodi*).<sup>44</sup> So what are their subjective preferences?

According to Scotus, the damned do have a motive for wanting to exist. Although they dislike their fault on account of the punishment it entails, they rejoice in their fault because of their pride and envy, and they want to exist so that their fault may continue.<sup>45</sup> But the misery they experience is a strong motive for wanting not to exist, and Scotus seems to think that their

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<sup>43</sup> *In Sent.* IV d. 50 a. 4 q. 3, 4:706a: "Loquendo autem de voluntate deliberativa, contingit aliquid velle tripliciter, scilicet per se et primo, et per se sed non primo, et per accidens. Primo modo quicquid vult voluntas, vult sub ratione boni positive. Secundo modo vult carentiam mali, etiam si in illa non apprehendat ratio aliquam positivam rationem boni; carentia enim mali per se est appetibilis, non tamen primo quia non appetitur mali carentia nisi quia prius ordine naturae appetitur bonum; ideo enim voluntas vult carentiam poenae, quia diligit bonum cui poena est contraria. Tertio modo, voluntas deliberativa potest appetere non esse inquantum ad non esse sequitur carentia poenae, quam voluntas per se appetit. Primo modo et secundo, damnati non volunt non esse, quia non esse non est appetibile per se et primo, nec per se non primo. Sed tertio modo appetunt non esse, inquantum scilicet ad non esse sequitur carentia poenae, quam per se appetunt."

<sup>44</sup> *Reportatio Parisiensis* IV B d. 50 q. 1–2, M fol. 110v, X fol. 85va: ". . . cum in damnatis non sit appetitus iusti. . . ."

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, M fol. 110v, X fol. 85va: ". . . damnati non appetunt non esse propter miseriam culpae fugiendam, quia habent appetitum perversum; ideo placet eis culpa et appetunt esse ad continuandum esse culpae propter superbiam et invidiam eorum. Tamen <tantum X> displicet culpa quatenus est causa poenae, non quatenus offensiva Dei, tamen appetunt ne quis eliceret talem actum formaliter quo puniuntur."

desire for non-existence in order to avoid their punishment is stronger than their desire for existence in order to offend God.<sup>46</sup>

What is striking is that the medieval authors here considered took for granted that those in the most deplorable situations would prefer not to exist. They weighed what is good and what is bad about their existence, whether it be subjectively experienced or objectively assessed from the outside, against other values, such as justice, God's honor, and—in Scotus's solution—God's will as it is expressed in his precepts. They largely ignored the question of how the misery they experience compares to certain pleasures that might still be open to them. Only Scotus has a brief remark about a certain joy the damned still experience, namely the joy of the fault in itself. But they do not discuss why they shouldn't still be able to enjoy, for example, certain blameless intellectual pleasures. In order to evaluate this hypothesis, I will now consider the desire for non-existence in light of Aristotle's theory of a pleasure intrinsic to life. If certain pleasures are available in the most deplorable situation of damnation, then a fortiori certain pleasures will be accessible to lives lived in less than extreme misery.

## 4.2 The Pleasure of Life

In *Nicomachean Ethics* 9 chapter 9, Aristotle establishes a close connection between pleasure and life. Yet human life, for Aristotle, is not merely the biological phenomenon of being alive, but rather consists principally in sense perception and above all in intellectual activity. This is a point Aristotle also makes in the “*ergon* argument” in book 1 chapter 7: the proper function of the human being is not merely being alive, which we share with plants, or sense perception, which we share with animals, but it involves reason (1097b33–1098a4). Accordingly, the pleasure one gets from life is above all the pleasure of intellectual activity. The context of the passage from *EN* 9.9 is the discussion of whether happy people need friends. Aristotle argues that a happy life is a pleasant life, and for a happy life one needs friends with whom to engage in virtuous activity (*EN* 9.9.1170a4–13). Then he goes on to say:

For animals, life is defined by the capacity for perception, but for human beings, it is defined by the capacity for perception or understanding; moreover, every capacity refers to an activity, and a thing is present fully in its activity; hence living fully would seem to be perceiving or understanding.

Now life is good and pleasant in itself; for it has definite order, which is proper to the nature of what is good. What

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, M fol. 110v, X fol. 85va: “Miseria ergo est quae est per se odibilis, et sic simpliciter nolenda secundum appetitum commodi.” See also M fol. 111r, X fol. 85vb: “Ideo affectione commodi magis nolendum est esse cum summa miseria quam simpliciter non esse.”

is good by nature is also good for the decent person; that is why life would seem to be pleasant for everyone. But we must not consider a life that is vicious and corrupted, or filled with pains; for such a life lacks definite order, just as its proper features do. . . .

Life itself, then, is good and pleasant, as it would seem, at any rate, from the fact that everyone desires it, and decent and blessed people desire it more than others do—for their life is most choiceworthy for them, and their living is most blessed. . . .

Perceiving that we are alive is pleasant in itself. For life is by nature a good, and it is pleasant to perceive that something good is present in us. Living is also choiceworthy, for a good person most of all, since being is good and pleasant for him; for he is pleased to perceive something good in itself together [with his own being]. (*EN* 9.9.1170a14–b5)<sup>47</sup>

In this text, Aristotle makes three claims that are not easily reconciled: first, that life is pleasant in and of itself (“Life itself, then, is good and pleasant . . .”); second, that life reaches its completion only to the extent one actively perceives or understands (“living fully would seem to be perceiving or understanding”); third, that the degree to which one experiences the pleasure of life depends on one’s moral condition (“But we must not consider a life that is vicious and corrupted, or filled with pains . . .”). So do sentient and intellectual creatures experience the pleasure of life simply in virtue of being alive? Or do only decent individuals experience the pleasure of life, but not the vicious?

Another place where Aristotle links the pleasure of life to being active more clearly than in the just-quoted passage is book 10 chapter 4, where he establishes that life consists in activity, and that pleasures complete activities. The connection between pleasure and activity is so close that it makes Aristotle wonder whether we seek life for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of life:

Why does everyone desire pleasure? We might think it is because everyone also aims at being alive. Living is a type of activity, and each of us is active toward the objects he likes most and in the ways he likes most. The musician, for instance, activates his hearing in hearing melodies; the lover of learning activates his thought in thinking about objects of study; and so on for each of the others. Pleasure completes their activities, and hence completes life, which they desire. It is reasonable, then, that they also aim at

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<sup>47</sup> Translation by T. H. Irwin (*Aristotle* 1999, 149–50). The bracketed addition is by Irwin. See also *EN* 10.4.1175a10–21.

pleasure, since it completes each person's life for him, and life is choiceworthy.

But do we choose life because of pleasure, or pleasure because of life? Let us set aside this question for now, since the two appear to be combined and to allow no separation; for pleasure never arises without activity, and, equally, it completes every activity. (*EN* 10.4.1175a10–21)<sup>48</sup>

With the help of this additional quotation, it seems that we can settle the questions the earlier text raised. For humans, life is not merely being alive but includes perceptual or intellectual activity. Hence that life is pleasant in and of itself means that perceptual and intellectual activity is pleasant in and of itself. Furthermore, both decent and depraved individuals are capable of perceptual and intellectual activities; hence both seem to be capable of activities that entail pleasure—although the qualities of their pleasures will differ according to the different qualities of their activities.<sup>49</sup>

It is to be assumed that most Latin medieval philosophers and theologians active after 1250 are familiar with these passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas has an interesting consideration about the connection between pleasure and a life worth living that seems like an expansion on Aristotle's point in the above quote that “each of us is active toward the objects he likes most and in the ways he likes most.” Aquinas emphasizes the significance of pleasure in choosing a specific lifestyle:

Every living thing manifests that it is alive by the activity that is most proper to it and to which it is most inclined. . . . Hence for human beings the life of each individual seems to consist in that in which the individual takes the greatest pleasure and which he or she seeks most intently. . . . Since some people seek above all the knowledge of the truth, while others seek primarily non-mental activities, human life aptly splits into the active life [*activam*] and the life of knowledge [*contemplativam*]. (Thomas Aquinas [1882–], *Summa theologiae* II–II q. 179 a. 1, 10:421a–b)

Aquinas's point that “the life of each individual seems to consist in that in which the individual takes the greatest pleasure and which he or she seeks the most” speaks not only to the central role of pleasure in life, but also to different experiences of pleasure by different individuals. This text treats

<sup>48</sup> Translation by T. H. Irwin (Aristotle 1999, 159).

<sup>49</sup> This interpretation is confirmed by a passage from the *Politics*, where Aristotle says that people are attached to life even if they have to endure great misfortune, because they find in life a “natural sweetness and happiness”; see *Pol.* 3.6.1278b24–30.

<sup>50</sup> The first complete Latin translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that enjoyed wide circulation was made by Robert Grosseteste in 1246/47. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas were the first two Latin medievals to write a complete commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

pleasure as the compass that indicates which kind of life is subjectively most worth living.

What do the damned seek that could give them pleasure? Scotus suggested that they enjoy offending God. But more generally, a wide range of activities of intellect and will should in principle still be open to them, allowing them to find some satisfaction in these activities—unless their suffering makes them unable to develop these activities, or their pride closes them within themselves.<sup>51</sup> If however their suffering or pride (or both) makes them irreversibly unable to develop such activities and find satisfaction in them, then the definite point where non-existence becomes preferable would seem to have been reached.

Thus there may well be a level of suffering that would make an individual unable to take any pleasure whatsoever in life. It may even be the case that the suffering will reach a point where death or annihilation become both subjectively and objectively preferable. But such cases, if they exist, appear to be less frequent than we are inclined to think in today's society. We tend to overlook the fact that, for those whose suffering does not extinguish all pleasant intellectual activity and who do not wall themselves off within themselves, the pleasure intrinsic to life remains accessible. This pleasure of life might sometimes outweigh the pains of a life spent in hardship. They would be able to experience pleasures such as loving and experiencing oneself as loved (that is, the pleasure of friendship); the pleasure of knowledge; and rejoicing in the beauty of reality.

This should be kept in mind in our own contemporary debates about the conditions under which we consider life worth living. Those who want access to euthanasia believe that their lives might reach a point where it is no longer worth living. Some arguments in favor of pre-implantation genetic diagnosis in order to allow selective abortions of "defective" embryos, or arguments that justify abortion by the claim that otherwise the child would live a life of economic and emotional distress, presume that certain lives might never reach a point at which they become worth living.

In these debates, it is important not to be too quick to assess what the value of an individual consists in. Human life even under less than ideal circumstances—be it for medical, social, or moral reasons—is able to experience the joy that results from consciously relating to what reality has to offer. Reality presents itself to us as fundamentally attractive. The real tragedy seems to be the inability to recognize this. Then, even if reality continues to be attractive, the inability to recognize this will prevent me from experiencing the joy of living. The tragedy of the damned seems to consist in this inability to acknowledge what is good in reality. It is for this reason that they prefer not to exist.

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<sup>51</sup> Mainly for theological reasons, Richard of Mediavilla denies that the damned experience any pleasure after the Last Judgment; *Quaestiones disputatae* q. 29, ed. Alain Boureau, 270–74.

## 5 Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper I asked whether there is anything inherent in life that makes it worth living, or whether life can become so bad that it would be better to cease to exist. We have to take stock now of what the theories considered here have to offer us in answer to this question.

Two points result clearly from Richard's considerations—if necessary adjustments are made in light of Scotus's critique. First, what is beneficial or detrimental for a creature can hardly outweigh what is beneficial or detrimental to God. Scotus goes too far when he demands that the comparison be made in the same order of goods, so that one could only compare the value of a creature's existence with the value of God's existence, or the cost of a creature's demise with the cost of the demise of God—rather than comparing the value of a creature's existence with, say, the value of God's honor. After all, it may well be that the good of the honor of God outweighs the good of a creature's existence. What this implies, at any rate, is that in comparison to God, a creature holds no absolute value, but only a relative value. It may well be better that a creature be annihilated. It is disconcerting, however, to claim, as Scotus does, that someone who is not at fault should prefer his or her non-existence if God so wishes. Scotus here prescind from any order of justice, since he does not ask whether such a person deserves annihilation. This is a consequence of making moral goodness depend on a decree of the divine will rather than on values that are internal to practices.

Yet the fact that a creature's value is relative when the creature is compared to God does not make it a feeble value. On the contrary: precisely because of its relation to God, i.e., to something infinite, the creature obtains a value that is greater than it would possess if it were only measured by its own intrinsic ontological dignity, that is, by the distance at which the thing stands from nothingness. Richard hinted at this idea by emphasizing that a creature's value is due to its participation in God.

This consideration is of limited usefulness, however, in assessing the value of intellectual creatures. Hence considerations about the mere ontological value of something are not fruitful. Anything whatsoever, even the dust on my shelves, the chicken bones in my trashbin, and the mosquitoes that bother me in the summer have an ontological value—and yet no one would deny that the non-existence of these would be at least acceptable, if not preferable. When we are talking about the value of human life, we cannot prescind from a human being's value as a sentient and intellectual creature. Thus sensible and intellectual pleasures must have a central place on the scale of values.

In my paper I have emphasized the role of pleasure in experiencing a life as worthwhile. While the joy of living is an important angle from which the value of one's life can be subjectively assessed, pleasure should not be considered as the only indicator of the value of life. Even if life did not

contain any pleasures, it could still be experienced as worthwhile. Aquinas makes this point—convincingly, in my view—in commenting on Aristotle’s question of whether we seek life for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of life. In the passage of his *Ethics* Commentary that deals with the quote from *EN* 10.4, Aquinas establishes that pleasure itself is not the ultimate point of life. In fact, pleasure is less choiceworthy than the activity that gives us pleasure.

[Aristotle] says that the doubt [i.e., whether we seek life for the sake of pleasure or pleasure for the sake of life] must be dismissed at present because these two questions are so joined that they do not admit of any separation. For there is no pleasure without activity, and on the other hand there can be no perfect activity without pleasure, as has been noted.

However activity, rather than pleasure, seems to be principal. For pleasure is a repose [*quies*] of the appetite in a pleasing object which a person enjoys by means of activity. But one desires repose in a thing only inasmuch as one judges it agreeable. Consequently, the activity itself that gives pleasure as a pleasing object seems to be desirable prior to pleasure. (Thomas Aquinas [1882–], *Sententia libri Ethicorum* X lectio 6, 47:570, lines 198–205)<sup>52</sup>

Though pleasure accompanies life, the point of life is not the pleasure, but rather the good that is attained by the activity that gives us pleasure. To illustrate Aquinas’s point with an example: virtuous activities are inherently pleasant, and yet it is not for the sake of the pleasure of, say, acts of generosity that the truly generous are generous; if anything, they act generously for the sake of the pleasure of those who benefit from their acts. While this consideration is not relevant for the value of the lives of the damned, who *ex hypothesi* do not practice any moral virtues, it is highly relevant to those who might experience more pain than pleasure (as may be the case with

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<sup>52</sup> Translation by C. I. Litzinger (Thomas Aquinas 1993, 609 n. 2038). See also Thomas Aquinas (1882–), *Summa theologiae* I–II q. 4 a. 2, 6:38a–b: “Respondeo dicendum quod istam quaestionem movet philosophus in X Ethic., et eam insolutam dimittit. Sed si quis diligenter consideret, ex necessitate oportet quod operatio intellectus, quae est visio, sit potior delectatione. Delectatio enim consistit in quadam quietatione voluntatis. Quod autem voluntas in aliquo quietetur, non est nisi propter bonitatem eius in quo quietatur. Si ergo voluntas quietatur in aliqua operatione, ex bonitate operationis procedit quietatio voluntatis. Nec voluntas quaerit bonum propter quietationem, sic enim ipse actus voluntatis esset finis, quod est contra praemissa. Sed ideo quaerit quod quietetur in operatione, quia operatio est bonum eius. Unde manifestum est quod principaliter bonum est ipsa operatio in qua quietatur voluntas, quam quietatio voluntatis in ipso.”

terminal cancer patients) but who can still experience a value and meaning in their life in virtue of the practice of excellent activities.

Tobias Hoffmann  
School of Philosophy  
The Catholic University of America  
Washington, DC 20064 USA  
E-mail: [hoffmann@cua.edu](mailto:hoffmann@cua.edu)

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