

THE SANCTIFICATION ARGUMENT FOR PURGATORY

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A recently advanced argument for purgatory hinges on the need for complete sanctification before one can enter heaven. The argument has a modal gap. The gap can be exploited to fashion a competing account of how sanctification occurs in the afterlife according to which it is in part a heavenly process. The competing account usefully complicates the overall case for purgatory and raises questions about how the notion ought to be understood.

The Sanctification Argument

A number of scholars have recently argued that the notion of purgatory should be taken seriously by all Christians, including Protestants, who have typically followed the Reformers in dismissing the notion as an extra-biblical teaching. Jerry Walls, in his recent book, *Heaven: The Logic of Eternal Joy*,¹ has argued that the doctrine of purgatory is plausible for Christians of all stripes, and that it is a natural development of the doctrine of salvation.

This paper will address a similar argument developed independently by Justin Barnard. I share Barnard's conviction that the case for purgatory is worthy of exploration by Protestant Christians. However the argument he offers, which I will call the sanctification argument for purgatory, has an interesting flaw--not a fatal flaw, but one that complicates the case for purgatory in a way that illuminates the range of viable options.

First let's look at the argument, which has a two-part structure. The first part is what Barnard calls the dilemma of sanctification.² The saved, those who have saving faith, are divided into two disjoint groups: the sanctified, those of the saved whose settled state of character renders them incapable of committing sinful acts,³ and the lapsable, those who lack such a settled state of character. Heaven, the argument continues, is essentially morally perfect. It is not possible (nomologically,⁴ at the least) that anyone in heaven sin. This is no problem for the sanctified, but what about the lapsable? Since they are capable of sin, they must be excluded from heaven, even though they are among the saved.

It appears, then, that either saving faith does not guarantee the heavenly state after death, or else heaven is not essentially morally perfect. This puzzle is the dilemma of sanctification.

The second part of the sanctification argument considers two prospective solutions to the dilemma: purgatory and provisionism.⁵ Purgatory



solves the puzzle by saying that through a process of spiritual purging the lapsable can and will become members of the sanctified in the next life, at which point they will enter heaven. Provisionism is the thesis that God makes “unilateral provisions” for the complete sanctification of the lapsable, so that they become members of the sanctified at death or immediately afterward.

The argument proceeds by process of diminution. A difficulty with provisionism is that there are reasons to doubt that instantaneous sanctification is something God would bring about, if indeed it is possible. If God is willing and able to provide complete sanctification to the saved immediately after death, it is hard to see why God would not provide complete sanctification to the saved before death. One reason, perhaps, is that it is significantly better for free and fallen creatures to have a hand in their own moral progress. This reason, however, supports the idea that such creatures have a hand in their moral progress after death as well; in other words, it supports purgatory over provisionism.⁶

This second part is the meat of the argument, and is the part likely to draw the most controversy. One might contend, for example, that the resemblance of above argument against provisionism to some versions of the evidential argument from evil⁷ renders the former vulnerable to recent criticisms of the latter. The considerations that call into question the assumption that we would be able to see God’s good reasons for permitting evil if there were such reasons (e.g., the limitations of our expertise and the complexity of wise governance of human history) arguably undermine the assumption that we would be able to see God’s good reasons for not completing the sanctification of the lapsable immediately after death if there were such reasons. Barnard devotes much of his article to defense of this stage of the argument.

However there is a modal flaw in the *first* part of the argument, the part that concludes it is impossible for the lapsable to be in heaven, and it is this part that is of present interest. After noting the gap in the logic, I will show how one can take advantage of it to fashion an additional account of sanctification in the afterlife, one which makes sanctification a heavenly process.

The Modal Flaw

Here’s the modal flaw. The claim is that from the moral perfection of heaven and the definition of ‘lapsable’ it follows that the lapsable cannot be in heaven. As Barnard puts it, “... the essential moral perfection of heaven is such that it is not nomologically possible for sin or evil to be there. Since *the Lapsable* are persons for whom sinful or evil actions are a nomological possibility, no one in heaven is lapsable.”⁸ The reasoning seems to be this:

It is not possible that anyone sin in heaven.

It is possible that the lapsable sin.

Therefore, none of the lapsable are in heaven.⁹

This conclusion challenges us to explain how the lapsable can become sanctified before entering heaven. (The notion of possibility Barnard uses is a causal or nomological possibility, but what follows will apply equally well to absolute possibility.)

The argument above is invalid. Consider this parallel argument.

It is not possible that anyone stand while sitting.

It is possible for five-year-old children to stand.

Therefore, no five-year-old child is sitting.

Five-year-olds *do* sometimes sit. But both premises are true, so the argument is invalid. We can see the problem easily enough: although it is possible for five-year-olds to stand, they may fail to exercise that capacity without ceasing to be five-year-olds. In particular, they may sit, and in that way fail to exercise their capacity to stand.

The situation is similar in the case of the lapsable. They have the capacity to sin, but they may fail to exercise that capacity without ceasing to be among the lapsable, that is, those whose character is not settled in a virtuous state. It follows from the premises that it is not possible for any of the lapsable to sin in heaven, but it does not follow that the lapsable cannot be in heaven. What's left open is the possibility that some of the lapsable be in heaven but not sin for as long as they remain lapsable.

The Heavenly Sanctification Account

The upshot of this in the present context is that there is, at least in principle, a solution to the dilemma of sanctification other than those Barnard considers. To explore this idea, let's construct a theological model that affirms the moral perfection of heaven and places some of the lapsable in heaven. I will call it 'the heavenly sanctification account.' The effect of the account, loosely put, will be to move the locus of heaven's necessary sinlessness from the stability of character its inhabitants enjoy to God's intentions for that state.

Unlike purgatory and provisionism, the heavenly sanctification account says that those whose character does not yet preclude sin, the lapsable, may nonetheless enter heaven, there to be further sanctified until the process is complete. A person like the "good thief" of the biblical crucifixion accounts, for example, enters heaven despite an imperfect character. However, God sees to it that he is not put in circumstances that result in his sin. With God's guidance, he exercises his freedom and plays a significant role in shaping his own character, as before death.

There are a number of ways we might develop this account to explain how God prevents each person in heaven from sinning. One route is to situate the account within a Molinist theory of divine providence, which includes both libertarian freedom and non-determining divine control over its exercise. Since on this view God knows by middle knowledge what any free creature would do if placed in given circumstances, God could know that a given person, though not perfectly virtuous, would not in fact sin in certain heavenly circumstances. A person prone to lie about her past, say, would be kept from the situations in which she would give in to this temptation. Instead, she would be placed in situations such that the free acts she would then perform helped to weaken and finally to eliminate her tendency to lie. A growing knowledge of divine grace for specific sins of her past might belong to the circumstances that enable her truthful behavior. The process could be either fast or slow, depending on the particulars of the case.

An alternative way of developing the account has it that God's knowledge of the saved person's dispositions and character (apart from any middle knowledge) enables God to place her in circumstances that do not lead to any sinful act. God would either steer her clear of any temptation to which her dispositions leave her vulnerable or provide an overriding grace to keep those dispositions from being active. Over time, in part because of the saved person's own actions, the problematic dispositions would dissolve. Here the locus of heaven's necessary sinlessness is again God's governance.

On both variations, heavenly sin will be nomologically impossible if God has sufficiently stable intentions to guide the lapsable clear of sinful actions. Given the regular intentions by which God governs the universe, the denizens of heaven will not sin. If, on the other hand, the very nature of God's faithfulness ensures that those God has redeemed and brought into heavenly communion with himself will remain in this communion, then heavenly sin will be absolutely impossible. Either way, the account includes the essential moral perfection of heaven, since, with a necessity grounded either in the divine will or in divine goodness, God in love protects each person in the heavenly state from sin.

There may be some question whether there *are* circumstances in which a lapsable person would continue to act without sin and which lead ultimately to complete sanctification, but the burden here is on the objector. The circumstances of heaven, no doubt, provide vastly more influence for the good than the circumstances of this life. If heaven includes anything like a vision of God's nature or an unparalleled presence of his Spirit, we should expect even an imperfect human to be thoroughly motivated and equipped to amend her faults.

Barnard distinguishes between satisfaction models and sanctification models of purgatory.¹⁰ In satisfaction models, purgatory's function is to allow people to make payment for their sins. In sanctification models, purgatory's function is to allow people to participate in their continuing moral and spiritual development. As Barnard observes, one important advantage of a sanctification model is that it avoids the primary Protestant objection to purgatory, viz., that payment for sin comes solely by the atoning work of Christ. It will be clear from the foregoing (if not from the name) that the heavenly sanctification account shares this feature of sanctification models of purgatory.

Purgatorial Metaphors

The traditional teaching on the nature and function of purgatory has typically included the torment of those being purged of their sin and the vivid image of purifying flames.¹¹ St. John Fisher's *Exposition of the Seven Penitential Psalms*¹² provides one historical example of an explicit comparison between the pains of purgatory and hell. In his sermon on Psalm 6, Fisher writes, "Truly, so great is the acerbity of the pains in that place that there is no difference between the pains of hell and those of purgatory except eternity" (11). St. John Vianney later expressed a similar view with the language of fire.¹³

The fire of Purgatory is the same as the fire of Hell; the difference between them is that the fire of Purgatory is not everlasting. . . . Cruel separation! To burn in the fire kindled by the justice of God! . . . To be devoured by regret, knowing that we could so easily have avoided such sorrows!¹⁴

Barnard, in contrast, borrows from C. S. Lewis the less hellish images of a painful washing and of a biting dental rinse.

Like Barnard's model, the heavenly sanctification account is suited to rather different imagery than that of Fisher and Vianney. Because both traditional thinking and all other thinking about the afterlife has been deeply shaped by imaginative depictions, it will be worthwhile to reflect on how the imagination may engage the heavenly sanctification account.

Consider, then, the description of the new Jerusalem¹⁵ at Revelation 22:2. It includes the tree of life, "bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." The image suggests an ongoing healing process. If we construe this as a spiritual process, it would be natural to suppose that it involves improving states of character--the melting away of the bitterness of a family dispute that's been passed down like an heirloom, the transformation of a plodding faith into an energetic love for God, and so on.

Consider also the imagery of Rev. 7:17 (the last clause of which is repeated at 21:4 and is reminiscent of Is. 25:8): "For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." 'Their' and 'them' refer to the great multitude in white robes standing before the throne of God; the scene is in heaven. The actions of God and the Lamb may be associated with sanctification: the leading to springs of living water is suggestive of the sanctifying Holy Spirit (cf. John 4:10, 13), and the wiping away of tears perhaps includes removal of the sorrow-producing effects of sin. (The Isaiah passage adds, "He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.") Both of these are depicted as processes, even if brief ones. My suggestion is that there is powerful biblical imagery of healing in God's presence in heaven, and that this suits the heavenly sanctification account precisely.

Objection: The Pain of Regret

Naturally these images of heaven do not involve torment or separation from God. One might object, though, that another kind of pain is inevitable if the heavenly sanctification account is true--not the pain of "knowing that we could so easily have avoided such sorrows" but of mourning one's past sins. On the face of it, all pain is ruled out: "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4). If regret is unavoidable in coming to recognize the extent of one's sin, it seems it cannot be a recognition that occurs in heaven.

Let me suggest two possible replies. We might take this last passage as a strictly accurate characterization of heaven after its initial phase and a generally accurate characterization of heaven as a whole. What the book of Revelation gives us, after all, is a picture, not a list of individually necessary

and jointly sufficient conditions. Perhaps at the outset the pain of regret, though present, is overwhelmed by the joy of grace and reconciliation.

Alternatively, we could make use of a distinction from *City of God*. Augustine writes,

Thus, knowledge of evil is of two kinds: one in which it is accessible to apprehension by the mind, the other in which it is a matter of direct experience. . . . There are two corresponding ways of forgetting evil. The learned scholar's way of forgetting is different from that of one who has experienced suffering. The scholar forgets by neglecting his studies; the sufferer, by escaping from his misery. The saints will have no sensible recollection of past evils; theirs will be the second kind of forgetfulness by which they will be set free from them all, and they will be completely erased from their feelings.¹⁶

Agreeing with Augustine, we might either say that regret is no part of the saints' recollection of sin, or else distinguish between two kinds of regret, one of which involves pain, the other of which is simply a judgment about one's wrongdoing--pain having been supplanted by gratitude for the present healing of one's spirit.

Objection: Sinfulness and the Presence of God

It is evident that the heavenly sanctification account does not enjoy the traditional status of either the purgatorial or the provisionist view. One possible motivating reason suggested by Barnard's discussion is that nothing sinful can be in the dwelling place or presence of God. If to be in heaven is to be in God's presence, the imperfectly sanctified must be excluded.

What do we mean by 'presence' here? Barnard refers to heaven as a place only for the sake of convenience, but suppose we do think of presence as a spatial location. Then we will probably want to say that God's presence is all-inclusive, i.e., that God is omnipresent. (As David asks in Psalm 139, "Where can I flee from your presence?") Or we might prefer to be sophisticated and say that although God's power and knowledge extend to all places, God does not, properly speaking, have location at all, so that no place is God's presence. In any case, the simplistic picture of a special region (in the sky?) where God is located loses its appeal on very little reflection.

If it's not a spatial location we have in mind, then perhaps God's presence is to be thought of as a kind of spiritual communion, a relationship of love and delight. In this case presence is the sort of thing that comes in degrees. That's a bit awkward if we are thinking of heaven as God's presence, since we don't normally think of heaven as coming in degrees (even if some things come in degrees in heaven¹⁷). It's also in tension with the assumption that nothing sinful can be in God's presence, since even sinful humans can have a measure of communion with God. Indeed, we might see the doctrine of the Incarnation as the doctrine that God is present with sinners in a very strong sense.

These problems might be avoided by identifying heaven not with God's presence *per se* but with some particular kind or degree of communion

with God. Such an identification would be consistent with a view that differed from the heavenly sanctification account only in name, one which allowed purgatory to take the role that heaven's initial segment does on the heavenly sanctification account. Purgatory could involve even experiences of theophany, revelation, and shared community with the perfectly sanctified (i.e., with those in heaven) rather than separation from God and the sanctified. The difference between a view like this and the heavenly sanctification account is merely semantic.

Conclusion

The sanctification model of purgatory gets much of its appeal from the value of free self-direction of character. It is a gift to be able to play a nontrivial role in one's own spiritual development. In granting this gift, God treats human beings with an adult dignity. The problem of evil may give theists a reason to affirm the value of the exercise of freedom; if so, the sanctification model of purgatory receives some support from that debate.

This is relevant in assessing the heavenly sanctification account. Both the sanctification model of purgatory and the heavenly sanctification account involve free postmortem action that contributes to the agent's moral development. To the extent that the value of the free self-direction of one's character supports the case for purgatory, it also supports the heavenly sanctification account. In fact, the latter also has three other virtues Barnard claims for the sanctification model: it solves the dilemma of sanctification, preserves the integrity of the process of sanctification, and avoids undermining the sufficiency of Christ's work as a satisfaction for sin.

Further, the heavenly sanctification account has advantages over purgatory. It quite naturally fits the biblical picture in which heaven and hell are the only salient afterlife destinations, and it avoids the suggestion that God is not present to the departed (cf. Paul's desire to be with Christ in Phil. 1:23-24).

So on the criteria Barnard identifies, the heavenly sanctification account is a serious competitor with the purgatorial view. No doubt still other accounts of postmortem sanctification could be developed. A hybrid of provisionism and the heavenly sanctification account, for example, would allow a partial, miraculous gift of sanctifying grace at death, followed by a completing process of sanctification in heaven. The point, in any case, is that there are other solutions to Barnard's dilemma of sanctification than two he considers, and so the sanctification argument for purgatory as a whole is somewhat more complex than it might at first appear.

On the other hand, as noted, versions of the sanctification model of purgatory and the heavenly sanctification account are similar enough that the distinction between heaven and purgatory can become a bit blurred.¹⁸ The way in which 'heaven' and 'purgatory' are defined naturally makes a big difference to whether the heavenly sanctification account will be classified as above, or as an unusually sunny picture of purgatory.

Whatever we may call it, the heavenly sanctification account preserves the free spiritual development of purgatory, but replaces the purifying flame with the medicinal leaves of the tree of life, which are "for the healing of the nations." The account is, I suggest, a viable alternative to a pur-

gatorial view, and one which shares its chief advantages. At this stage of the dialogue, there remain several competing responses to the dilemma of sanctification that deserve serious consideration.¹⁹

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NOTES

1. Oxford, 2002.
2. "Purgatory and the Dilemma of Sanctification," this journal.
3. Note that 'the sanctified' refers to the *completely* sanctified. This usage isn't meant to imply that lapsable have not begun a process of sanctification. On the contrary, the lapsable are among the saved, so the Holy Spirit has begun this process in them.
4. What Barnard has in mind is a necessity that involves law-like connections (e.g., between creature's characters and the absence of sin in heaven), not necessarily a necessity of physical laws.
5. Barnard passes over a third solution, viz., perfectionism, the thesis that the lapsable can progress to become members of the sanctified in this life, and so enter heaven immediately upon death. The difficulty with perfectionism is that it is not at all likely that all of the saved are perfected in this life. Wesley, for example, thought that only very few people are perfected in this life, and this is borne out by observation.
6. Barnard also considers an argument that personal identity could not be preserved through provisionism's instantaneous postmortem perfection.
7. Going a bit further, Barnard says this argument against provisionism itself is a species of the evidential argument from evil. See the end of section 4, "Solving the Dilemma of Sanctification: The Problem(s) with Provisionism."
8. See the end of section 3 of Barnard's paper, "Protestant Soteriology and the Dilemma of Sanctification."
9. Cf. Barnard's statement: "Interestingly, the essential moral perfection of heaven does entail that no one possessing saving faith attains or occupies heaven *as* someone who is lapsable."
10. See section 5, "Purgatory: Two Models."
11. We might note that the image is a biblical one. "But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver" (Mal. 3: 2-3a). Fire is also mentioned in I Cor. 3:15 and I Pet. 1:7, which *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed., Doubleday, 2003) cites in connection with purgatory.
12. Trans. Helen Barbeau Gardiner. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. Thanks to Chad Engbers for calling my attention to these sermons.
13. Vianney (d. 1859) was a French priest who became widely known as a confessor and spiritual director.
14. "Sermon on Purgatory," <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/stj18004.htm>.
15. Note that the *identification* of the new Jerusalem with heaven can easily be challenged. Robert Gundry, for one, has proposed that it be identified with God's redeemed people. See his *The Old is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck), 2005, in the series *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament*. Still, the city is associated with God's presence (22:3, 22:3). See also Richard Bauckham's excellent

The Theology of the Book of Revelation, Cambridge, 1993, in which the new Jerusalem is considered as place, people, and divine presence.

16. Book XXII, chap. 30.

17. Cf. Lewis: “[E]ven in Heaven some perpetual increase of beatitude, reached by a continually more ecstatic self-surrender, without the possibility of failure but not perhaps without its own ardours and exertions—for delight also has its severities and steep ascents, as lovers know—might be supposed” (*Letters to Malcolm*, 108).

18. Peter Kreeft, through his C. S. Lewis character, has suggested that purgatory is the first part of heaven, a preparation for “deep heaven.” See *Between Heaven and Hell*, InterVarsity Press, 1982, 21, and *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know about Heaven . . . But Never Dreamed of Asking*, Harper & Row, 1982, p. 21.

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